The New Criterion

December 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *December 1998*

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Associate Editor *Robert Messenger*
Assistant to the Editors *Sara E. Lussier*
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Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*.

James Sloan Allen's essay will appear in expanded form in *What Is Art?* (Yale) in 1999.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Alexander Coleman reviews music regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Paul Dean is the head of the English Department at Portsmouth Grammar School, Portsmouth, England.

Mark Falcoff's book *A Culture of Its Own: Taking Latin America Seriously* was just published by Transaction.

Lawrence A. Johnson is a regular contributor to the *Chicago Tribune* and *Fanfare* magazine.

David Mermelstein writes about classical music for *The New York Times*.

Francis Morrone's *Architectural Guidebook to New York City* has been reissued by Gibbs Smith.

Mario Naves reviews art regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Mary Jo Salter's fourth book of poems, *A Kiss in Space*, will be published by Knopf in February, 1999.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator* and author of the "Culture Vultures" column for *The American Spectator*.

Richard Tillinghast's new and selected poems, *Today in the Café Trieste* (Salmon Publishing, Ireland), is available from Dufour Editions.

Karen Wilkin's latest book is *Morandi* (Rizzoli).

Keith Windschuttle's most recent book is *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (Free Press).

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Notes & Comments: December 1998

James W. Tuttleton, 1934–1998

The death of James Tuttleton last month was an incalculable loss to *The New Criterion*. It was, first of all, a deep personal loss: Jim was a close friend of the editors, and his wise counsel and stately, companionable presence will be profoundly missed. His death also deprived *The New Criterion* of one of its most commanding writers. A specialist in American literature who had taught at New York University since 1968, Jim Tuttleton ranged with articulate authority over the vast expanse of American literature, from the work of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and (a figure of special interest) Henry James. He also wrote with penetrating insight about more contemporary figures: Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot (another revered figure in the Tuttleton pantheon), Ralph Ellison, and Louis Auchincloss.

Nor did Jim confine his attention to fiction and poetry. Some of his most memorable work deals with what the critic Lionel Abel called "the intellectual follies": the insights and excesses, the wisdom and extravagance of other critics. Jim was often admiring. In essays on Edmund Wilson, for example, or the work of the great nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman, he displayed an enviable gift for capturing the specific gravity—the distinctive inflection of individual sensibility—that stamped the work of a particular critic.

But Jim was also often the opposite of admiring. He brought enormous patience and rhetorical skill to the task of exposing the fraudulent, the intellectually bogus, the morally bankrupt in literature and criticism. As the academic profession of literature in our time has slid more and more deeply into a pit of fatuous word play, nihilistic pseudo-theories, and a repellent obsession with perverse sexuality, Jim became ever more adept at transforming distaste into lively and devastating criticism. Whether the subject was deconstruction, the feminist assault on literary studies, or simple misrepresentation of the historical record, he could be counted on to provide an exacting anatomization, laying out with wit, clarity, and formidable but ever discreet erudition the intellectual failings and moral pathologies of the subject under discussion.

Jim's first piece for *The New Criterion*, a review essay about the nineteenth-century feminist writer Margaret Fuller, appeared in December 1984, two years after we began

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publication. In the succeeding fourteen years, he wrote more than sixty pieces for *The New Criterion*—more, we believe, than he wrote for any other publication. His work appeared in many other places as well: in a number of specialist academic journals and also *The American Scholar*, *Commentary*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Chronicles*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Yale Review*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He published two editions of Washington Irving's works, one for the Library of America, the other for *The Complete Writings of Washington Irving*. His book *The Novel of Manners in America* (1974) is widely recognized as a definitive study. In *Vital Signs: Essays on American Literature and Criticism* (1996) and *A Fine Silver Thread: Essays on American Writing and Criticism* (1998), he collected—generally in substantially expanded form—some of his most important essays. *The Primate's Dream*, a new collection of essays on race and American literature, will be published posthumously in the spring of 1999 by the house of Ivan R. Dee.

Jim Tuttleton was a critic on the side of truth. He had a profound faith in our ability to uncover the truth and, consequently, a profound conviction that criticism that sought to evade or deny the truth had reneged on its most fundamental mission. One of his most ambitious essays, "Simon Schama, Francis Parkman, and the Writing of History"—written for *The New Criterion*'s special tenth anniversary issue in September 1991—highlights this theme. The essay takes off from *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, a book by the well-known historian Simon Schama that had been published to wild adulation. The key to the popularity of Schama's book was in its fashionable denial of historical truth. *Dead Certainties* deliberately blended fact and fiction, truth and speculation, in an effort to undermine the distinctions that separate them. In one oft-quoted passage, Schama wrote that "historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator"—a statement that robs history of any claim to objectivity or factual authority.

Schama's approach, Jim noted, "aligns him with the intelligentsia who nowadays tell us that there is no such thing as an essence of an event, that there are really no genres like 'history' or 'fiction,' and that there is no line between expository and narrative prose: there is only discourse, verbal production, *écriture*." If accepted, Schama's assertion is a prescription for intellectual nullity, as shocking as it is mendacious. As Jim put it:

> That a distinguished historian, at the top of his profession at Harvard, should dismiss as fatally false every historical account because of the personal perspective of the author is a scandal that the wise will ponder in dismay. It suggests that no historian can be self-conscious enough or objective enough to rise above his own horizon in contemplating the horizon of the past; and it implies that no reader is competent to judge whether or not the historian has sufficiently done so.

In effect, Schama's epistemological relativism denies that there is such a thing as the discipline of history: there are only stories, more or less compelling, equally bereft of any claim to truth.

Today, the relativism that Jim decried in Schama's book is endemic in the humanities. It is, indeed, the academic *deformation professionelle* of our age. One of the most celebrated impresarios for this hydra-headed virus is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the inventor of deconstruction—a form of intellectual self-abuse that stands to criticism in approximately the same relationship that "virtual reality" does to the everyday world we actually inhabit. Jim often attacked the demeaning frivolities of deconstruction. One of his wittiest and most far-ranging attacks is "Jacques et Moi," a long essay that he wrote especially for his book *Vital Signs*. About Derrida's assertion that "we cannot cling to the illusion that the

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signifier answers to the function of representing the signified"—i.e., that words refer to reality—Jim comments that

> Ideas, for me, have consequences. I have always acted on them and so, I believe, do most critics. What is the consequence of this argument banishing presence from the word, reality from discourse? What is the effect of asserting that the decentered text lacks a single referent, a unified aesthetic intention . . . that, in short, there is nothing outside the text and the text is a freeplay of diversities wherein authorial intention and coherence of meaning cannot be discovered? The effect is that the reader, or literary critic, is freed from the task of thinking that the text means something. . . . Meaning is not inherent in the text but is rather created by the reader. Interpretation is thus a free-for-all.

As he points out, the distortion that transforms criticism into free-play also robs literature of its most fundamental *raison d'être* as a purveyor of reality. At bottom, the "appeal of literature lies precisely in this capacity of the aesthetic to call into being credible worlds alternative to our own. If literature were merely a language game . . . we would tire of it very quickly." (An observation whose truth is confirmed by the extent to which literature is considered passé by the literature faculty at many of our premier colleges and universities.)

Although it was firmly grounded in literature, Jim Tuttleton's criticism and scholarship grew out of a larger existential concern—a concern with the continuity of those traditions—aesthetic, intellectual, political, religious—that have defined the shape of our cultural aspirations and made us who we are. That those traditions are everywhere under siege in cultural life today is the melancholy *donnée* with which we must all begin. This was a fact that Jim understood with profound historical insight. In an essay on Emerson and his circle he wrote for *The New Criterion* in 1996, he acknowledges Emerson's greatness as a writer but then dilates on "the negative impact, on American culture, of the transcendental doctrines Emerson espoused."

> I am not referring here to the doctrine of self-reliance, which most parents teach their children quite naturally, though not perhaps in so absolutist a degree. I refer to what happens in a culture like ours when institutions *as such* are attacked as vicious, when people are told that the church and temple, the college and the political party, the Red Cross, the employee's union, and the veteran's group (and so forth) are all unnecessary organizations and are indeed inimical to one's self-development, and that all one needs to do is to consult one's own inner oracle and act out one's own inner imperative, however antisocial it may be. To be told, Do your own thing, is for most people, it seems to me, ultimately disorienting and will leave them floundering and adrift and (even worse) determined—such is the Emersonian imperative—to *act out* their idiosyncrasies. . . . The 1960s represented, in my view, a widespread, disastrous, vulgar translation into action of such Emersonian doctrines, a sort of Age of Aquarius reincarnation of the 1830s "Newness." It produced some colorful personalities and genuinely eccentric communitarian "lifestyles" worthy of Fruitlands. But we have still not recovered from that decade's more sinister attack on the foundations of American culture and the moral life. We still have not directly challenged the Emersonian belief that there is no standard of right and wrong outside the self. And we have not recovered from his assault on the institutions by which we naturally and rightly organize our educational, political, religious, social, and intellectual life. It is through these institutions alone (however imperfect they may be) that jointly and mutually we implement our most deeply held convictions about the national life.

We observed that the death of Jim Tuttleton deprives *The New Criterion* of one of its most commanding writers. That must be emended: his death has deprived contemporary American letters of one of its wisest and most percipient critics.

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The betrayal of liberalism: IV

Liberalism & imperialism

by Keith Windschuttle

To propose that Great Britain should voluntarily give up all authority over her colonies, and leave them to elect their own magistrates, to enact their own laws, and to make peace and war as they might think proper, would be to propose such a measure as never was, and never will be adopted, by any nation in the world. . . . If it was adopted, however, Great Britain would not only be immediately freed from the whole annual expense of the peace establishment of the colonies, but might settle with them such a treaty of commerce as could effectually secure to her a free trade, more advantageous to the great body of the people, though less so to the merchants, than the monopoly which she at present enjoys. . . . [I]nstead of turbulent and factious subjects, [they would] become our most faithful, affectionate, and generous allies; and the same sort of parental affection on the one side, and filial respect on the other, might revive between Great Britain and her colonies, which used to subsist between those of ancient Greece and the mother city from which they descended.

—Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)

Western imperialism is widely regarded among liberal thinkers today as the most damning indictment of Western culture. As the process unfolded over the past five hundred years, it was accompanied, we are now frequently told, by unconscionable exploitation and in some cases the near total destruction of the indigenous inhabitants of the European colonies, together with widespread slavery and gross abuse of indentured labor, not to mention the rampant destruction of the environment. Moreover, rather than reproaches of this kind waning as the era of European colonialism in Asia and Africa recedes into distant memory, they appear to be increasing.

Today, few undergraduates of European ancestry can complete a degree in the humanities at any Western university without being made thoroughly ashamed of the imperial crimes of their forebears. In the past decade, the leading lights of the "post-colonial" movement in literary criticism, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, have achieved celebrity status for their claims that Western culture is inherently and irrepressibly racist and imperialist. One result is that the old heroes of literary and popular culture, the men who won the West and who explored the wilderness, are now seen as the villains. Their places have been taken by those who fought imperial oppression, the Geronimos, the Gandhis, and the Mandelas. Among the signs of our times are the obligations now routinely assumed by presidents and prime ministers throughout the West to offer apologies and compensation to the descendants of the victims. A new book by a British writer even argues that its imperial record has cost Europe its claim to being civilized.

Over five centuries Europeans, armed with a

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> set of invincible stereotypes, devoured tribal society across four continents. The image of the bestial and pitiless savage which licensed this onslaught was never more a portrait of the Mexica, or the Inca, or the Nama, the Herero, the Tasmanians, or even the tigers of humankind, the Apache, than it was an image of Europe's own destructive capacity. It is a prevailing irony of this story that as the tide of European conquest engulfed tribal peoples, so the colonists' civilization succumbed to a savage whom they had so violently condemned. But the savage was within themselves.

This quotation is from Mark Cocker's *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold* (1998), which describes the European conquest of the tribal societies of North and Central America, Australia, and Southwest Africa as "one of the great acts of human destruction, comparable to the Nazi holocaust, or the Stalinist purges of the Soviet Union, or the mass slaughters of communist China." It follows another book on the same subject, by the Swedish author Sven Lindquist, called *Exterminate All the Brutes* (1996), a title derived from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which the author claims epitomizes what European imperialism was all about.

In the hands of those literary critics who call themselves cultural historians, behavior of this kind is not treated as an aberration—it was built into Western culture, they maintain, from the start. For instance, Edward Said in *Orientalism* says that as early as the *Iliad* and the first Greek dramas, Europe drew an aggressive line between itself and "the Other" of Asia. Europe portrayed itself as "powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant." Moreover, argues Richard Waswo in *The Founding Legend of Western Civilization* (1997), this aggressive division has been perpetuated intact down through the ages. He chronicles the legend of the fall of Troy and the founding of Rome, which he calls a "legend of perpetual colonization" that "became the rationale for imperialist attitudes from ancient Rome to Vietnam." The story is manifest, he says, in cultural expressions as diverse as the *Aeneid*, *The Faerie Queene*, the fiction of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, the films of John Ford, in American policy in Vietnam, and even in the current policies of the World Bank.

Although these authors affect a sweeping command of Western culture, one thing that is conspicuously absent from their writing is a proper awareness of the genre they inhabit themselves, that is, the tradition of anti-imperialism. Many of them write as if they believe the critique of imperialism first emerged among its colonized subjects as a protest at their bondage. The most they concede to the Western side of the equation is that anti-imperialism also arose within Marxism, especially Lenin's book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917). (Marx himself, some are aware, was in favor of British rule in India, which he thought would hasten the world revolution.)

The reality, however, is quite different. Since the Middle Ages, the merits of imperialism have been the subject of an extensive debate within Western culture. Much of this debate has been sharply polarized and there have been few times and places in which a favorable policy has been unequivocally endorsed. For most of the past millennium, argument has focused on the political consequences of empire, but since the seventeenth century it has also been a matter of sustained debate about economic policy. Over the last two hundred years, the intellectual tradition that has raised the most objections to imperialism has been not Marxism but liberalism. Indeed, Lenin's work on the subject is no more than a thinly modified expropriation of the book *Imperialism: A Study*, published in 1902 by the English liberal writer J. A. Hobson. One of the ironies of the debate in the 1990s is that the author of *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold* is a journalist on *The Guardian* newspaper in England, which in the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth was known as *The Manchester Guardian*. Under this name, it was a liberal, anti-imperialist journal

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whose record provides an effective counterexample to the one-dimensional, ahistorical caricature of the story told by writers like Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and Mark Cocker himself.

As the quotation from Adam Smith at the start of this article indicates, there have long been prominent authors in the liberal tradition who have insisted that imperialism is against the financial, military, and cultural interests of Europe. Smith was by no means the first to express such sentiments; others preceded him by centuries. It is also true, however, that in the second half of the nineteenth century a version of liberalism emerged that became complicit with the imperialism of the era, especially with the plethora of annexation that culminated in the "scramble for Africa" after 1880. To talk sensibly about the true relationship between European culture and imperialism, these two strands of liberalism need to be disentangled and placed within their historic context.

Since the fall of Rome, the nature of the Roman Empire and the causes of its decline have occupied a unique place in the Western mind. Anthony Pagden has argued in *Lords of All the World* (1995) that for much of this period the lesson heeded was that the fate of Rome demonstrated there was a point beyond which all empires could not grow. On reaching this point, they would begin to falter and then progressively degenerate. Their administrative competence would become enfeebled, their military forces would be spread too thinly, and the metropolis would begin to lose its original character and virtue. Once imperial expansion had begun, so it was reasoned, the process fed upon itself and became ungovernable. It eventually became a threat to the stability and prosperity of the capital itself. In 1795 Immanuel Kant summarized this view: "For the laws progressively lose their impact as the government increases its range, and a soulless despotism, after crushing the germs of goodness, will finally lapse into anarchy." Had the Romans remained in Italy, a number of seventeenth-century scholars argued, their sovereignty would have lasted forever. Edward Gibbon provided his own age with the full story:

> The rise of a city which swelled into an empire, may deserve as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time, or accident, had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.

The lesson of Rome had a powerful influence on public policy among the states of Europe that emerged from the Dark Ages. The republican city-states of medieval and renaissance Italy and the Hanseatic League of cities on the Baltic Sea, though all had extensive overseas trade networks, consciously developed a culture that elevated commercial gain over military glory and discouraged expansionary ambitions. Similarly, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the republic of the United Netherlands was only willing to become involved in wars that furthered the nation's commercial interests, and restricted overseas expansion to trading posts.

Until the nineteenth century, the principal exceptions to this pattern were the empires of Spain and Portugal, and, to a lesser extent, France. The two Iberian kingdoms had willingly embraced the model of Imperium Romanum when they embarked upon a course of conquest and direct rule over vast tracts of territory in the Americas, India, China, and the Pacific. Yet within a hundred years, their example was being held up elsewhere in Europe as confirmation of the original thesis about the inevitable fate of over-reached empires. Spain, in particular, was regarded as a victim of its conquests. The American mines that had initially poured so much gold and silver into the

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Spanish treasury had blinded its rulers to the fact that long-term prosperity could only come from agriculture and trade. The defense of their American possessions, and their attempt to impose an internal cultural, legal, and religious uniformity upon them, were impoverishing the country. By the 1820s, the Spanish empire in the Americas was all but lost. The founder of the Bank of England, William Paterson, observed: "The Indies, properly speaking, may be said to have conquered the Spaniards, rather than having been conquered by them."

When the British initially arrived in the Americas they emulated the Roman ambitions of their Iberian rivals. Henry VII's letters of patent to John Cabot in 1496 gave him rights to "conquer and possess" any territory not already in Christian hands. Elizabeth I urged the same upon Sir Walter Raleigh in 1584. It became clear to the British by the seventeenth century, however, that the future of their global interests lay not in further territorial gains but in trade which, in turn, depended not upon conquests on land but upon control of the seas. The Scottish author Andrew Fletcher declared in 1698: "The Sea is the only Empire which can naturally belong to us. Conquest is not in our Interest."

Instead of Rome, the ancient imperial model that British liberals adopted until the final quarter of the nineteenth century was that of Athens. Unlike the Romans, the Athenians had established colonies around the Mediterranean that had been independent partners of the metropolis. In 1704, Fletcher described Britain's empire as a replica of the Achaean League, a model that was later applied by James Madison and James Wilson to their proposals for a federal structure for the United States. Of course, the British king and his government demonstrated themselves most reluctant to see this model enshrined in the actual independence of the American colonies. Nonetheless, there were many British liberals at the time who, like Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, endorsed the Greek ideal of colonies as children who would grow to be the "faithful, affectionate, and generous allies" of the parent. Prominent among these was the philosopher and historian David Hume, who pointed out in February 1776 that it would be impossible for a European power to forcibly hold down an overseas colony whose inhabitants belonged to much the same culture: even if the reconquest of Britain's American colonies was successful, Hume asked rhetorically, "How would they be governed?"

Hume, Smith, and Gibbon expressed views that had by and large prevailed within educated opinion of the liberal variety by the end of the eighteenth century in both Britain and on the Continent. In France, Diderot and Montesquieu had argued that the expansion of kingdoms should be confined to "sweet commerce," which constituted the proper relationship between peoples and which offered the best prospect of checking the proliferation of modern warfare. By 1800, most of "enlightened" Europe agreed that large-scale overseas dependencies were not only economically unviable but politically undesirable because,

Classical liberal political theory had regarded the state as a necessary evil whose optimum size was as small as possible. The high Victorian era, however, saw the emergence of a different perspective. At Oxford, political theorists . . . used Hegelianism to make a profound about-face in liberal doctrine: liberty was no longer to be defined as freedom from the state; liberty was now something delivered through the state.

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as the British had found in 1776, the French had discovered in the 1790s, and Spain was to confirm in the 1820s and 1830s, they could even threaten the stability of the metropolitan powers. Moreover, Britain and France had realized in the Caribbean that the brutal exploitation of forced native labor and of imported slave labor not only offended Christian ethics but also was wasteful of economic resources and uncompetitive with the output of commercial agriculture on the American mainland. The Caribbean had also demonstrated that African slaves and indentured native laborers could, as they did at Saint Domingue in 1791, display the same potential for revolutionary discontent as the settlements of independent European farmers.

This liberal opinion, however, was not enough to curb imperial expansion. During the Napoleonic wars, the British established a series of naval bases to preserve its ocean trade from disruption by France and its allies. After 1815 they turned several of these bases into permanent entry points into Africa, South America, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the Far East. For the next sixty years, these bases remained sparsely funded trading posts and military depots that served primarily to guarantee free passage to British ships and commerce. However, between 1880 and 1914, these entry points expanded to such an extent that they had become the components of a mighty empire on which the sun never set.

The most convincing explanation of this transformation is that of the economic historians P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins. Their two-volume *British Imperialism* (1993) argues that the seeds of the nineteenth-century empire were sown with the financial revolution that followed the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This eventually led to the emergence of a class of "gentlemanly capitalists," or "merchant bankers and merchant princes," centered on the great financial houses of the City of London. Gentlemanly capitalism, Cain and Hopkins argue, had close ties to the government and the military and helped to promote expansionist forces of investment, commerce, and migration throughout the world. Its main objective was creating an international trading system centered on London and mediated by sterling. World trade was to be financed by short-term credit, while world development was to be promoted initially by long-term loans to foreign governments and subsequently through direct overseas investments. The resulting expansion of global commerce was to be handled, transported, and insured by British firms. These aims were all fulfilled. Between 1870 and 1914, Britain supplied 40 percent of the world's total of exported capital.

Cain and Hopkins argue that, in its early stages, there was no sharp break between this vision and that of the Enlightenment. It was based on the liberal idea of improvement and retained a faith in free trade, both of which Britain hoped could be exported worldwide. Moreover, the gentlemanly capitalism model, while obviously expansionist, was neither inevitably imperialist nor militarist. It found many willing clients among governments, investors, developers, and traders on each of the Asian, African, Australian, and American continents. It became imperialist, they argue, primarily to protect its investments, either because, as in the case of several members of the Ottoman Empire, the local political system was incapable on its own of guaranteeing them, or when they were threatened by other imperial or nationalist rivalry. Another reason why Britain eventually re-adopted the Roman model of empire—openly symbolized by the proclamation in 1876 of Queen Victoria as Empress of India—was for its impact on domestic politics. Though liberal, the gentlemanly capitalist system was far from democratic or republican. Throughout the nineteenth century it conceded democratic reforms only reluctantly and to evade crises.

Overseas expansion and imperialism played a vital role, Cain and Hopkins argue, in maintaining property and privilege at home in an age of social upheaval. It did

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this partly by securing cheap food and raw materials from the dominions and major trading partners, partly by the ideological appeal of manly exploits and an international civilizing mission, and partly by the theatrical attraction of a queen and her government bestriding the world like a colossus. Imperialism thus became an integral part of the configuration of British society, which it both reinforced and expressed.

Although Marx's analyses of nineteenth-century imperialism claimed that it served the interests of the new industrial middle class, Cain and Hopkins point out that manufacturers did not possess enough individual wealth or power to be major players among the British imperial elite. Moreover, their concentration in the north of England and their lack of connections through their want of genteel family backgrounds and elite school education meant they were not sufficiently acceptable to impose their will on the political system. The "moneyed interests" were not subservient to the industrialists, as Marx claimed, but vice versa.

Within this context, the northern manufacturers produced a political movement of their own with an independent political and economic theory. While strongly supporting overseas trade, this movement came out against both militarism and imperial expansion. Known as "Radicalism," it was originally a tendency within the Liberal Party. Its leading spokesmen were John Bright and Richard Cobden who represented what was known as the Manchester School of liberalism and who were the staunchest defenders of laissez faire, the small state, and individual self-reliance. Cobden, who became notorious in the 1850s for his opposition to the Crimean War, saw himself and his constituents as the true heirs of the principles of Adam Smith. For Cobden, free trade was as much an ethical and political issue as a matter of economics: "I see in the Free Trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe," he said, "drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in bonds of eternal peace." He told an audience at Manchester in 1846:

> I believe that the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies—for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour—will die away; I believe that such things will cease to be necessary, or to be used, when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man.

Although Radicalism helped elevate two British prime ministers, Gladstone and Lloyd-George, it was no match for the alternative movement that came to dominate the Liberal Party in the 1880s, the high point of British imperial expansion. This was Liberal Imperialism—also known as New Liberalism—which sneered at the Radicals as "little Englanders" and regarded their pacifism as naïve in a world where Germany and Russia had emerged as aggressive new powers. Under the influence of Liberal Imperialism, one-time Radicals like Joseph Chamberlain abandoned their creed to eventually become the most zealous prophets of Imperium Brittanicum. Many of the rest broke with liberalism after 1900 and shifted their center of gravity leftwards, taking their pacifism and anti-militarism into the new Labour Party.

Apart from imperialism itself, the political issue on which the traditional version of liberalism foundered was the role of the state. This had two dimensions: one at the level of political theory; the other within electoral politics that followed the extension of the franchise. Classical liberal political theory had regarded the state as a necessary evil whose optimum size was as small as possible. The high Victorian era, however, saw the emergence of a different perspective. At Oxford, political theorists imported the German idealist philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, which held that the institutions of society are the concrete embodiments of

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ethical values. The state thus has a greater claim upon the allegiance of the individual than conscience. The main center of Hegelianism at Oxford was Balliol College where T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and Bernard Bosanquet tutored the generation of statesmen and public figures that was to govern the empire in the period of high imperialism. These included the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon; the South African Proconsul, Lord Milner; the Prime Minister from 1908–16, Herbert Asquith; and the Foreign Secretary from 1905–16, Sir Edward Grey. The philosophers Green and Bosanquet were both prominent in Liberal Party politics and used Hegelianism to make a profound about-face in liberal doctrine: liberty was no longer to be defined as freedom from the state; liberty was now something delivered through the state.

While Hegelian idealism was too arcane to be of direct influence in any but the most exalted circles, its challenge to classical liberalism coincided with the growth of democratic politics. The Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 extended the franchise to males in virtually all social classes. The new concept of the state sanctioned the existing political parties to abandon laissez faire and to appeal to these new voters with the promise of social legislation and welfare reform. Whereas classical liberalism regarded the state as a necessary evil, the democratic perspective of New Liberalism saw the state as a necessary good that was capable of removing or alleviating the insecurities and misfortunes of the newly enfranchised lower orders. It was the Liberal Imperialist governments of 1906–16 that went furthest in delivering tangible legislation to back these ideas: the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1906, the Old Age Pension Act of 1908, the Minimum Wage Act of 1909, and the National Insurance Act of 1911. The welfare state of the later twentieth century was largely an unfolding of the principles and measures introduced in these years.

The two Liberal governments that made these reforms held power with the support of the Labour Party, which by then had become the repository of the anti-militarist and anti-imperialist cause of the old Radicalism. As they were to discover in 1914, however, the pacifists had as little influence on the Labour Party as they had had on their former political partners. The intellectual elite of Labour was composed of people who shared a close affinity, in terms of education, social class, personal contacts, and political philosophy, with the ruling Liberal Imperialists. In particular, the members of the Fabian Society, headed by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, wrote policy documents for both the Labour and Liberal Parties. With their dedication to social planning and a strong state, the Webbs saw their main enemies located not among the conservatives of the Tory Party but within the thinning ranks of the Cobdenites. The London School of Economics was founded by the Webbs and the Liberal politician R. B. (later Lord) Haldane not to enshrine classical political economy but to sanction far greater state spending than the financial orthodoxy then thought tolerable, as well as to provide a rationale for the Fabian policy of state ownership of key sectors of British industry.

Their relations with the Labour Party earned the Fabians the epithet of "the black-coated proletariat," but they had much more in common with the ruling class than the class struggle. Indeed, on occasions they could not hide their contempt for the lower orders whom they saw not as constituents to serve but as obstacles to overcome. The Fabian playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1904:

> Capitalism has created, as it formerly did in Rome, an irresistible proletarian bodyguard of labourers whose immediate interests are bound up with those of the capitalists, and who are, like their Roman prototypes, more rapacious, more rancorous in their Primrose partisanship, and more hardened against all the larger social considerations, than their masters, simply because they are more needy, ignorant and irresponsible.

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Instead, the Fabians and leading Liberal Imperialists preferred close business and personal contacts with each other, constituting a social circle that also included bankers and some Conservative journalists and politicians. H. G. Wells, originally a member of the group, wrote a venomous account of them in 1911 in *The New Machiavelli*, describing them as "very keen on military organization," determined to greatly increase state spending on education and social reforms, and unfazed about a likely war with Germany. Indeed, a war of this scale, they reasoned, would require a planned economy which would need to be directed by people like themselves. The historian Elie Halévy, discussing the Webbs when he first met them, recorded that

> their socialism was profoundly anti-liberal. They did not hate the Tories, indeed they were extraordinarily lenient to them, but they had no mercy for Gladstonian Liberalism. It was the time of the Boer War and both the advanced liberals and the men who were beginning to form the Labour Party had generously sided with the Boers against British Imperialism, in the name of freedom and humanity. But the two Webbs and their friend, Bernard Shaw, stood apart. They were ostentatiously imperialistic. The independence of small nations might mean something to the liberal individualist. It meant nothing to collectivists like themselves. I can still hear Sidney Webb explaining to me that the future belonged to the great administrative nations, where the officials govern and the police keep order.

Halévy also cited Shaw discussing politics in terms that would become more familiar in the speeches of the great dictators of the 1930s: "The world is to the big and powerful states by necessity: and the little ones must come within their border or be crushed out of existence."

In the event, the Fabians did not get to direct the first war against Germany (though it was a different story in the Second World War and especially its aftermath when their plans for the welfare state and the nationalization of coal, steel, and utilities were largely achieved). There was one consequence of the first war, however,

By 1979, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were both running for office on platforms based on a revival of classical economics and liberalism. . . . Those Western nations who have chosen to ignore the British and American examples and persevered with government intervention plus a big, generous welfare state have all found the result has been low economic growth plus persistently high unemployment, which have consigned 10 percent and more of the lower orders to underclass status.

that they soon came to believe fulfilled everything they stood for: the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1932, the Webbs became one of the most famous of the "political pilgrims" who visited the Soviet Union and pronounced it a marvel of social planning and progressive reform. They "fell in love" with what they found there and wrote their final book together, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (1935), extolling its virtues.

Still, the first third of the twentieth century seemed to have rung the death knell of classical liberalism. In these years, apart from its name, what kept the Liberal Party "liberal" was its nominal adherence to the free trade component of Adam Smith's economics. But free trade was not the defining issue. Even the Labour Party as late as the 1920s supported free trade against

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protection on the grounds that it provided workers with cheap food. The real point, as it had always been, was the relationship between the individual and the state. On this question, any difference between the Liberal Imperialists and the socialists within the Labour Party was of degree, not principle. Both thought the modern era demanded a considerable increase in the role and authority of the state. In 1925, one of the prophets of the new age, John Maynard Keynes, declared the liberals of the old Radicalism to be personae non gratae. He said the Liberal Party "must emancipate itself from the dead wood of the past."

> In my opinion there is now no place, except in the Left wing of the Conservative Party, for those whose hearts are set on old-fashioned individualism and laissez faire in all their rigour—greatly though these contributed to the success of the nineteenth century. I say this, not because I think that these doctrines were wrong in the conditions which gave birth to them . . . but because they have ceased to be applicable to modern conditions.

Once the First World War had begun, the pacifist and anti-imperialist wing of old Radicalism was largely a spent force. In 1914, *The Manchester Guardian* opposed Britain's engagement in war with Germany, but once hostilities started it largely fell in line with popular opinion. There were very few traditional liberals who had the courage of the convictions of the philosopher Bertrand Russell. His opposition to the war cost him his post at Cambridge and earned him a prison sentence. Russell, who was for some time a socialist and a visitor to the Soviet Union in 1920 (where, unlike the Webbs, he immediately became disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime) deserves to be seen as a far more important figure in determining the fate of the old liberalism than is usually credited. He became one of the architects of the eventual rebirth of classical liberalism in the twentieth century. He did this principally by undermining the philosophical foundations of neo-Hegelianism and its political derivatives. Though he had himself been a student and early supporter of British Hegelianism, it was he and G. E. Moore who became disenchanted enough to wage a successful counterattack. In the name of traditional empiricism and what came to be called analytic philosophy, they routed philosophical idealism and the various speculative and grand theories that derived from it. In the long run, this was to have an impact not only on philosophy but on politics as well. Russell was a principal force in creating the cleavage between Anglo-American philosophy and Continental philosophy which holds to this day. This great divide meant that the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger, and their attendant politics of Communism and Nazism, which won so many adherents in Germany, France, and Italy, were far less influential within educated opinion in Britain and the United States. Or, rather, they were less influential when it really counted, that is, when these ideologies were serious contestants with Western liberal democracy for intellectual and political hegemony during the Thirties, Forties, and the Cold War.

Among Russell's later philosophical allies were members of what was known as the "Vienna Circle" of logical positivists. Carl Hempel, Rudolf Carnap, and others who left their home in the 1930s for the United States where they produced the same kind of hard-nosed, non-speculative thought that Russell had championed in Britain. Vienna also produced another young man of a similar cast of mind, Friedrich von Hayek. He taught economics at the University of London in the 1930s and, while employed by the London School of Economics in 1944, produced *The Road to Serfdom*, a powerful indictment of the School's Fabian founders and of the plans for postwar reconstruction prepared by the Labour Party. Hayek identified these policies as little different to the national socialism the British were fighting on the Continent. They had been "bodily taken over from the German ideology."

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> Twenty-five years ago there was perhaps still some excuse for holding the naïve belief "that a planned society can be a far more free society than the competitive laissez faire order it has come to replace." But to find it once more held after twenty five years of experience and the re-examination of the old beliefs to which this experience has led, and at a time when we are fighting the results of those very doctrines, is tragic beyond words.

Hayek argued that social planning and Communism were two sides of the same coin and that the only genuine alternative to them were the ideas of classical liberalism, of which the wartime generation, reared for so long on New Liberalism, was now hardly aware. But once the war was over and the Labour Party's postwar reconstruction had begun, Hayek's views were quickly relegated to the far right of the political spectrum. This was partly because, although most Western countries adopted the Labour brand of social planning, there had emerged no resulting diminution of political liberty, as Hayek had predicted. It was also because the New Liberal economic theories of John Maynard Keynes delivered a long period of growth, high wages, and prosperity. At the same time, the Roman model of the British Empire distintegrated, succumbing to much the same fate as its ancient archetype, just as Kant, Gibbon, and the classical economists had forecast. In the 1950s, Hayek moved to the University of Chicago where one of his colleagues was Milton Friedman, a kindred spirit in commitment to traditional laissez faire liberalism. For the next twenty years, while the "Keynesian revolution" held sway over all Western economies, Hayek and Friedman worked on their own counter-revolution, designing an approach derived from classical economics that could maximize economic growth while minimizing state intervention.

It was not until the 1970s, when Keynesianism had degenerated into "stagflation" (growing inflation plus growing unemployment) that Western governments began to look around for an alternative. By this time, the Chicago school's counter-revolution called "monetarism" had established its intellectual credentials, as had their critique of the welfare state, which had itself swollen from a modest pre-1914 insurance system into a massive complex of programs that, Friedman argued, "weaken the family, reduce the incentive to work, save, and innovate, reduce the accumulation of capital, and limit our freedom." Hayek was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics in 1974 and Friedman won it in 1976. By 1979, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were both running for office on platforms based on a revival of classical economics and liberalism.

> *The great irony . . . is that those who today most loudly denounce the historic crimes of Western imperialism are working within an intellectual framework generated by the German philosophy of either Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, whose followers not only have records for homicide that are unequalled in human history, but who are themselves all indebted to the same Hegelianism that was used to sanction British imperialism at its highest stage.*

The period since then has been a remarkable triumph of this approach: in effect, the revival of the old Radicalism of the nineteenth century by the new conservatism of the late twentieth century. What Keynes dismissed in the 1920s as a small rump on the left of the Conservative Party has grown to become the dominant political force of

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our time. Those Western nations who have chosen to ignore the British and American examples and persevered with government intervention plus a big, generous welfare state have all found the result has been low economic growth plus persistently high unemployment, which have consigned 10 percent and more of the lower orders to underclass status. For a time, it seemed that the rapid growth of the "tiger economies" of East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s might provide an alternative approach through their version of state-directed capitalism based on industry policies and ministries of technology. However, the crises that have swept through these economies in the last two years have revealed them as the vulnerable beasts that classical economics has always predicted.

As they have worked themselves out over the past two hundred years, then, the sweeping turns in the history of liberalism's stands on imperialism and the state have provided a number of object lessons. Apart from endorsing classical liberalism and classical economics as the best guarantees of both freedom and prosperity, the story indicates that the current efforts by British and European social democratic governments and their academic advisors to find a "Third Way" that preserves capitalism while expanding "social justice" are most likely to be fruitless. There is no new Third Way. The most likely contenders, the New Liberalism of the imperial era, Keynesian economics, and the interventionist state, have already been tried and found wanting.

This story also gives the lie to the current fashion for denigrating the whole of Western culture on the basis of its imperial record. The West has long nurtured an intellectual tradition that has been opposed to imperialism and the conquest of others. This tradition might not have always been in the ascendancy, but its persistence over the centuries is impressive and, at this point in history, it reigns throughout its home turf without a serious challenger. The great irony of this part of the story is that those who today most loudly denounce the historic crimes of Western imperialism are working within an intellectual framework generated by the German philosophy of either Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, whose followers not only have records for homicide that are unequalled in human history, but who are themselves all ultimately indebted to the same Hegelianism that was used to sanction British imperialism at its highest stage.

There are, of course, no guarantees that any of the above lessons will be heeded in the future or even remembered for very long. As well as the triumph of classical economics, the last two decades have seen a revival of idealism and irrationalism within Western intellectual life. The philosophies of Hegel and his heirs are once more being taken seriously in academic quarters. In some cases, such as the current fashion for these ideas among literary critics and social theorists in our universities, they may well cause the cultural alienation of a generation of undergraduates, with consequences that are difficult to predict. In others, such as the recent endorsement of Hegel's philosophy by the U.S. State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, the outcome is also unpredictable. So far, Fukuyama appears to have generated few followers among his peers and, indeed, the American version of liberal democracy that he claims has brought us to "the end of history" seems an unpromising site for a Hegelian revival. As the British example demonstrated a century ago, a political elite susceptible to Hegelianism is unlikely to be either liberal or democratic. Nonetheless, the record of this particular infection in penetrating the Western mind over two centuries should not be underestimated. Its epidemiology shows that, like anthrax, it can often lie dormant for a generation or two before becoming virulent again. Constant exposure and criticism appear to be the only effective immunization.

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Tolstoy's prophesy: "What Is Art?" today

by James Sloan Allen

As the nineteenth century was packing its bags in early 1898, Leo Tolstoy published the most outlandish book ever written on one of that century's favorite subjects: art. Approaching his seventieth birthday, Tolstoy distilled in *What Is Art?* the moralistic bile that had been rising in him for two decades and spewed it over virtually the entire artistic culture of his century—and of modern times. He spared almost nothing, including his own great works. For he had come to believe most of it exemplified "false art," perpetrating a variety of social evils and depriving Western civilization of the necessary virtues of true art. "Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement," he cried, bent on awakening modernity from its complacency; "art is a great matter."

Eccentric and lucid, cranky and brilliant, funny and fierce, *What Is Art?* resounds with the effusions of a moral convert who has spurned the life he once led and now burns with imperious convictions. But *What Is Art?* is much more than this. Notwithstanding its bizarreries and precepts that could persuade no one but the most artistically hidebound, *What Is Art?* deserves reading by anyone attentive to the uses and abuses of art. If you can resist slamming the book shut before taking in Tolstoy's full case for and against art, you will be nodding assent that "art is a great matter"—while pondering a defense of art against Tolstoy. And now, as our century readies its own departure—amid the faultlines of postmodernism that cleave history, the tide of popular culture that threatens to sweep everything before it, and persistent controversies over the future of the classical arts and the mandate of artistic freedom—you can also read *What Is Art?* for what it says about our fin de siècle as much as for what it said about Tolstoy's.

Tolstoy wrote *What Is Art?* twenty years after suffering the spiritual crisis that broke his literary career in two. His magisterial fiction unfurling a panorama of history and probing the tangles of human relations came before. Afterwards, charged by fresh moral zeal, came a series of short, often magnificent, didactic tales and the novel *Resurrection*, along with a stream of hortatory essays reinterpreting Christianity, berating Western culture, and idealizing a Christian, pacifist, peasant society. Although Tolstoy had another dozen years to live after *What Is Art?* appeared, it crowned his labors as a cultural critic.

Soon translated into many languages, *What Is Art?* immediately sent reverberations across Europe (conveniently charted by William B. Edgerton in an article of 1978, "The Critical Reception Abroad of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*"). It did not win Tolstoy many friends. The book was written by "an opinionated, impassioned moralist and at the same time a narrow-minded man," charged the French critic Emile Faguet. "The inevitable obsolescence of an old man's taste in art," jabbed George Bernard

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Shaw (who nonetheless found some merit in it). And Rainer Maria Rilke dismissed the book as "a disgraceful and silly pamphlet."

Such an unfriendly reception was not altogether new to Tolstoy. His hostility to his times and his fervent spirituality had already provoked the prolific litterateur Max Nordau to include a full chapter on "Tolstoism" in that infamous diatribe against the artistic and intellectual movements of the late nineteenth century entitled *Entartung* (1893), published in English as *Degeneration* (1895). Nordau makes a nice companion to Tolstoy, since *Degeneration* and *What Is Art?* go after many of the same perceived villains. But Nordau, a physician and future Zionist leader, waged his battles as a partisan of liberal causes and progressive scientific civilization (albeit not large cities). Drawing on the Darwinian theories of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, Nordau defined "degeneration" as a "severe mental epidemic" symptomatic of "an exhausted central nervous system" caused by "the vertigo and whirl of our frenzied life" and manifested in a variety of twisted ideas and baffling artistry. And he classed "Tolstoism" as a degenerate "mental aberration" of "weakness and despondency" that "assumes the form of pessimism" and inclines to a wan "mysticism" akin to that of Symbolism and Wagnerism (two of Tolstoy's own primary targets). Although Nordau would have endorsed many of Tolstoy's complaints in *What Is Art?*, he would quickly have tallied its prescriptions among the symptoms of Tolstoy's own degeneracy.

Tolstoy never mentions Max Nordau in *What Is Art?* But despite their many allied loathings, Tolstoy would have scorned Nordau's theories as highfalutin pseudoscience that obscures the malaise of modern culture and misses the point of art. Tolstoy needed no theory of "mental epidemic" to grasp the causes of modern culture's troubles. He simply looked at what is now often called the "artworld"—the social and economic facts, the institutional arrangements, and the ideological underpinnings of the dominant artistic culture. These observations disclosed to his tendentious eye what art actually does to people caught up in that world, and how art would function differently outside of it, as well as how art can either advance human life or drive civilization into the dust—and how the modern artworld is heading civilization straight there.

Tolstoy's argument, bearing obvious affinities to the long tradition of moralistic art theory reaching back to Plato, goes like this. Scanning the cultural landscape, Tolstoy saw vast human and economic resources expended "to satisfy the demands of art." And, ticking off a list of related institutions and pursuits, he describes an artworld we have come to know well: "In every large town enormous buildings are erected for museums, academies, conservatories, dramatic schools, and for performances and concerts. Hundreds of thousands of workmen—carpenters, masons, painters, joiners, paperhangers, tailors, hairdressers, jewelers, molders, typesetters—spend their whole lives in hard labor" to further art. Abetting all of this, he adds, governments and private benefactors subsidize the arts, and the press publicizes "new works of art, . . . discussed in the utmost detail by critics and connoisseurs." Only the military "consumes so much energy as this." Moreover, "as in war, the very lives of men are sacrificed." For, owing to the modern professionalization of art, "hundreds of thousands of people devote their lives from childhood to learning to twirl their legs rapidly (dancers), or to touch notes and strings very rapidly (musicians), or to draw with paint and represent what they see (artists), or to turn every phrase inside out and find a rhyme to every word." And those exertions amount to nothing less than the "stunting of human life"—which Tolstoy sardonically illustrates through an opera rehearsal whose abusive conductor, brutalizing regimen, and absurd drama reduce the performers to dispirited, bickering, pathetic drudges.

These bleak observations of the artworld prompted Tolstoy to ask: "Is it true that art

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is so important that such sacrifices should be made in its name?" Rummaging through books of philosophy for an answer, and putting this question to habitués of the artworld, he obtained merely comfortable yeas supported by unconvincing notions of "what is meant by art and especially what is good art." Then, behind the easy affirmations and the loose definitions, Tolstoy detected the influence of an idea that had implicitly sanctioned these "sacrifices," but that he believed could never wholly justify them. That idea is aestheticism.

Tolstoy had in mind not the overt doctrine of art-for-art's-sake identified with his contemporaries Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, but the underlying Western artistic tradition since the Renaissance, which had uprooted the arts from their traditional religious and social grounds and had given them an autonomy sustained by aesthetic theory from the eighteenth century onward. Aestheticism has become the air we breathe, Tolstoy says, thanks to the gathering assumption that "artistic enjoyment is good because it is enjoyment" and "enjoyment is good because it is enjoyment." But enjoyment could no more be the essential and true purpose of art, he declares, contriving a facile analogy, than "that the purpose and aim of food is the pleasure derived when consuming it." Any art created for this false purpose therefore has to be "false art." And false art corrupts whomever it seduces with the wiles of "artistic enjoyment."

Breathing the fire of his anti-hedonic morality, Tolstoy blames the evil folly of false art, first, on the secular lassitude and lasciviousness of "upper class life," and, second, on the ascending modernist aesthetics of adventurous formalism that he found utterly incomprehensible. Both of these traditions have bastardized art, he says, rendering it exclusive and elitist, sensual and sensationalist, intellectual and arcane, while removing it from common life and harnessing it to the aimless pleasures and careerist rewards of the artworld. And with every step in "the direction art has taken," it has strayed farther from its original path and deprived human beings of art's invaluable life-serving purposes.

To save humankind from the depredations of "false art," Tolstoy summons civilization to the banner of true art. True art has nothing much to do with aesthetics. It has everything to do with social life. "Art is one of two organs of human progress"—along with language—he says. "By words man interchanges thoughts, by the forms of art he interchanges feelings." That makes art an "indispensable means of communication," which forges an emotional "union among men," and "without which mankind could not exist." This is Tolstoy's concise answer to the question "What is art?"

Equating art with emotional communication, or "infection" by feelings, as Tolstoy puts it, was hardly a path-breaking proposition. The idea had been around at least since Aristotle's musings on catharsis. But Tolstoy reduces emotional "infection" to a thumping dogma that he wields to banish anything else that art might do and to batter everything in the reigning artistic culture. True art infects us spontaneously, he says, with "the simple feelings of common life, accessible to everyone without exception" and leading to the highest emotion, "the brotherhood of man." Any artwork that fails to infect us this way is false. If it ignores elemental emotions, it is false. If we have to learn to like it, it is false. If it plays upon sensationalism or sensuality, it is false. If it unites only "habituated" or "perverted" devotees, it is false. When true art thrives, social bonds strengthen, culture flowers, and human beings flourish. When false art rules, social bonds wither, culture falters, and human beings lose their very humanity. No wonder Tolstoy insisted "art is a great matter."

Finally, in a burst of optimism, Tolstoy heralds a time when true art will prevail. Rooted in generic human experience and communicating genuine feelings, this art will be universally accessible folk art and art forms born of social life, such as masses, marches, and birthday tunes, as well as

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edifying moralistic tales like his own. "The art of the future will thus be completely distinct, both in subject matter and in form, from what is now called art," he confidently predicts. "Open to everyone," it will shed the baggage of the modern professional artworld laden with economic sacrifices and human exploitation, elitism, and intellectualism, and usher in "the brotherhood of man."

By this stage, most readers have parted company with Tolstoy. No one who admires the power of art to transcend the immediate communication of feelings and expand the very range of the emotions, the senses, the imagination, and the intellect will contentedly follow Tolstoy to the campfire for peasant songs. And yet, only the most adamant aesthete would deny that art can yield some of the adverse consequences Tolstoy lamented. When we invite art to challenge and change us, even for the better, we assure that art will divide us to some degree, and may even arguably do us harm. And everyone acquainted with obsessive artists has probably asked a version of Thomas Mann's pained question in "Tonio Kröger"—one of Mann's numerous excursions into the perils and paradoxes of aesthetics—"What more pitiable sight is there than a life led astray by art?"

By the same token, we need not share Tolstoy's lamentations to see in the artworld of our times much that had worried Tolstoy, and to let his thoughts at least give us pause. For in the century since *What Is Art?*, virtually every social fact and artistic tendency that Tolstoy bewailed has doubled and redoubled. Art schools, museums, performing arts centers, symphony orchestras, opera companies, theater and dance troupes, and diverse arts organizations have proliferated, attracting patrons to the arts, enticing young people to become artists, and weaving the arts ever more tightly into the fabric of modern life. Meanwhile, the aesthetics of modernism, seeming to prize art over ordinary life and to remove human content from art (which Ortega y Gasset descriptively rather than pejoratively labeled "the dehumanization of art" in his eminent essay of that title in 1925), largely conquered the artistic landscape. And some of the consequences of modernism unfolded much as Tolstoy had expected in cultural fractiousness and intellectual pretentiousness (including the rise of a tepid aesthetics of the "interesting," which he had belittled for masking art's emotional aridity).

Were Tolstoy to attend Yasmina Reza's *Art*, the prize-winning hit Broadway play of 1998, he would shake his head knowingly at this dramatization of the social havoc that the modernist artistic culture could wreak. A near allegory of *What Is Art?*, the play opened in New York (following runs in Paris and London) one hundred years to the month after the complete *What Is Art?* came out in March 1898. Dramatizing an ardent conversation among three friends over a classic modernist white-on-white painting that one of them has purchased for a hefty sum, the play swirls around many of Tolstoy's bristling themes: the egotistical pretensions of artists and their acolytes, the aesthetics of modernism, the intellectualization of art, the elitism of taste, the economics and ideologies of the artworld, and the severing of human bonds by conflicting judgments of modern art. After the painting has literally brought the friends to blows, a reconciliation occurs, culminating in an imaginative acceptance of the painting by its severest critic—who invents a comforting narrative for its colorless abstraction. The artwork that had divided the friends, unraveling the ties that had long held them together, unites them anew.

Most playgoers leave the theater smiling at *Art*'s erudite comedy of modern art and resilient friendship. But Tolstoy would not likely exit smiling. Although he would applaud the play's send-up of modernism, he would rue the denouement as another triumph of dehumanizing aestheticism, another victory of artificial taste, another submission of human relations to false art and false feeling. Tolstoy's idiosyncrasies aside, taking a cue from a scene of

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the play in which the painting's owner thrusts a book at his critical friend and charges him to "read Seneca," the urbane philosopher of Stoic composure, for clues to both the painting and life, one could say that the clever philosophical play deepens and darkens if you "read Tolstoy."

Although the career of modernism and of the artworld since his day would have confirmed most of Tolstoy's anxieties, certain currents of late-twentieth-century culture might have offered him some encouragement. One of these is the postmodern reaction against modernist aesthetics and artistic hauteur. He predicted that such a reaction must come. The postmodern campaign of eclectic, anti-formalist aesthetics and populist accessibility in the arts virtually echoes several of Tolstoy's most fervent complaints. But postmodernism's jaded irony, nihilistic relativism, and artistic whimsy would give him new chills, down to the collective shrug of contemporary aesthetic theory that lets art be anything that anyone says it is. As the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto reports in *After the End of Art* (1997)—another coincidental centennial reprise on the central theme of *What Is Art?*—nowadays art "can be anything artists and patrons want it to be" because "nothing is any more true as art than anything else, nothing especially more historically false than anything else." Danto's "end of art" would, perhaps, signal to Tolstoy the end of culture. Or, Tolstoy might instead discern here the death merely of "false art," after a century's delay, clearing the ground for true art to take root at last.

Whatever comes "after the end of art," we can be sure of one thing. The future will belong very much to the swelling ubiquity of the popular arts and popular culture. And this is one prospect that we might expect the populist Tolstoy to be able to cheer for sure. The unifying tears of sadness and bursts of joy in movie theaters, the widely gratifying familiarity of television soap operas and sitcoms, the collective exuberance of rock concerts, the adoring mass-identifications with celebrities, the irresistible children's fables of Disney, the wholesome thrills of families at theme parks, and so on, all reach us without elitist expectations or intellectual effort. And increasingly they dissolve the boundaries of customs, nations, and social class. Here Tolstoy would seem at home.

But our popular culture is not truly Tolstoy's "art of the future." Tolstoy knew the difference between traditional folk art and the modern popular arts. He championed folk art as the indigenous artistic expressions of a people's common experience, usually linked to enduring ceremonial or other social practices, and serving social bonds. The modern popular arts may draw on common experience, but they transform it with sophisticated technologies that shape experience as much as they reflect it, and always to serve commercial ends. Folk art belongs to tribalism. Popular art belongs to capitalism.

Reiterating a conservative wariness—descending from Plato—of facile, morally indifferent artists, and anticipating many twentieth-century critics of popular culture, Tolstoy warned against any artworks that ingeniously play on the emotions through artistry or technology (although he welcomed benignly unifying devices outside of art like the telegraph and the telephone). For they do not "infect" us with genuine experiential feelings. They rather captivate us with contrived stimulation and "infect" us with any feelings they want. Sensations that feel like authentic emotions can turn out to be responses manipulated by adroit technicians of the arts. What else are movies and television, Tolstoy would say in the words of *What Is Art?*, than forms of "amusement art . . . manufactured to ready-made, prearranged recipe . . . by the armies of professional artists" who deploy imitative "borrowings" and mechanical "striking effects" to produce artificial "physiological effects" on audiences? If Tolstoy were to see the images and techniques of American popular culture pervading life from infancy to old age, taken into schools and churches, molding politics and morality, and em-

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braced by peoples around the world, he might well concede that, as he had wished, the "art of the future" is "diffused among mankind" and forging a global unity. But he wouldn't like it. For it would show him that synthetic "false art" and the mushrooming professional artworld, encompassing both high art and low, can indeed eclipse elemental, natural feelings, and that sheer "artistic enjoyment" can unify the world in its image after all.

A curmudgeonly opponent of modernism, and a moralistic adversary of aesthetics, Tolstoy gives us in *What Is Art?* an ideal of art that only diehards like himself could extol. But he also proves himself to be a thought-provoking observer of the social effects of art, a perceptive student of the modern synergistic commercial artworld, a cautionary voice against the aestheticism that blithely allows lives to be "led astray by art," and a prescient critic of modern popular culture. Tolstoy knows our times better than we might guess. And he urges us to grasp the importance we grant to art in the lives we live, if not in the principles we espouse, prodding us to think about art as "a great matter" (not just as pleasure or a career) and to defend the best of its powers against its enemies. You cannot read *What Is Art?* without recognizing that these enemies include ideologues like Tolstoy himself, who would strangle art with morality. But neither can you read it without suspecting that the enemies also include—and nowadays more prodigiously and insidiously than ever—those who would trivialize art and exploit it for any purpose, oblivious to the detriment to art or life.

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The scholar of scandal

by Brooke Allen

In 1813 Lord Byron, discussing the elderly Richard Brinsley Sheridan with some friends, gave his opinion that

> Whatever Sheridan has done or chooses to do has been, *par exellence*, the *best* of its kind. He has written the best comedy (*School for Scandal*), the best drama (*The Duenna*, to my mind far beyond that St Giles lampoon, *The Beggar's Opera*), the best farce (*The Critic*—it is only too good for a farce), and the best address (Monologue on Garrick); and, to crown all, delivered the very best oration (the famous Begum speech) ever conceived or heard in this country.

It is true that Sheridan was a man of extraordinary talent, abilities, and energy. He had two separate and very successful careers: a literary one—upon which his reputation rests today—that lasted, incredibly enough, only until he was thirty; and a political one, to which he personally attached more importance, that continued until his death at the age of sixty-five.

Sheridan saw himself as a parliamentarian first, a playwright second, but posterity has never agreed: when he was buried in Westminster Abbey it was not upon the spot he would have chosen, at the side of his longtime comrade-in-arms, Charles James Fox, but in Poet's Corner. (With insult added to injury, he was placed next to Richard Cumberland, the writer he had so memorably mocked in his play *The Critic*).

A new biography of Sheridan by the Irish critic and journalist Fintan O'Toole[1] portrays Sheridan as he would perhaps most like to be remembered: a political radical whose career personified the rapidly developing revolutionary ethos of his time, the development of liberal thought, and the birth of modern concepts of universal human rights and international law. An Irish nationalist whose political consciousness was formed by the ideals of the American Revolution, Sheridan remained unswervingly on the left throughout an era of dramatically shifting parliamentary alliances. Sheridan held onto his radical principles, as O'Toole demonstrates, at a considerable cost to himself.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was descended from Donnchadh O Sioradain, a seventeenth-century Gaelic-speaking Irishman who was a convert to Protestantism, modified his name to Dennis Sheridan, became minister to the Protestant Bishop of Kilmore, William Bedell, and participated in Bedell's project of translating the Old Testament into Irish. This career set a pattern for the Sheridans, who while belonging to the Protestant middle class would continue to identify with the Catholic masses from whom they had sprung: Dennis's younger son, William Sheridan, was the sole Bishop

1 *The Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1751–1816*, by Fintan O'Toole; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 544 pages, $30.

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in the Church of Ireland to refuse to take the Oath of Supremacy and Allegiance to William III in 1688, a stand that cost him his position and his livelihood. The playwright's grandfather, Thomas Sheridan, was a scholar and clergyman, a great friend of Jonathan Swift, whose Church career was ruined because of a sermon thought by the triumphant Hanoverian dynasty to be seditious.

Sheridan, then, came from a cultivated, politically independent background. His own father, another Thomas Sheridan, had turned away from the Church, the traditional family career, and toward that other forum for rhetoric and performance, the theater. At the time of his son Richard's birth in 1751, Thomas was the popular manager of the Smock Alley theater in Dublin and the city's unrivalled "Monarch of the Stage"; his wife Frances, Richard's mother, was a friend of Samuel Richardson and successful in her own right as the author of a popular novel of sensibility, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph*. But only too soon Thomas Sheridan experienced a fall from grace as abrupt as that of his father when his production of Voltaire's *Mahomet: The Imposter* incited a six-hour political riot.

The furor was such that Thomas announced that he had "entirely quitted the Stage, and will no more be concerned in the direction of it." Abruptly, the Sheridans' prosperous, settled life came to an end, and they left Dublin for London, taking their older and favorite son Charles along, but leaving three-year-old Richard and his sister Lissy behind. "The next eight years," O'Toole writes, "were what must have seemed to a little boy a series of expulsions from and re-admittances to the bosom of the family. . . . In all, between the ages of three and eighteen, he spent just four and a half years living with either of his parents."

At last Richard and his sister were sent for, and in August, 1759, the boy left Ireland. Although Richard was never to return to his native island even for a visit, he would staunchly consider himself an Irishman throughout his life, and the country's fate dominated his political agenda and obsessed his imagination. O'Toole points out that Sheridan's younger contemporary the Duke of Wellington, also born in Ireland, opined that "being born in a stable does not make a man a horse." Sheridan disagreed.

At the age of eleven Sheridan was sent as a boarder to Harrow, while the rest of the family decamped to France, pursued by creditors. He was neither academically outstanding nor particularly popular: as one of his teachers put it, "his industry was just sufficient to protect him from disgrace." He seems to have been practically abandoned by his parents, and when his mother died suddenly, in 1766, his father did not even contact him personally.

Modern parents and psychologists attach inordinate importance to the fostering of "self-esteem" in the developing child. Such was not the case in the eighteenth century, but even by the standards of their day Sheridan's parents were both physically and emotionally neglectful. Nevertheless, if the adult Richard Brinsley Sheridan was to have his share of weaknesses, a lack of self-esteem was not among them. By the age of seventeen, when he was reunited with his family in London, he was attractive and visibly intelligent, as well as being fully conscious of his personal assets. Lissy describes him as

> handsome, not merely in the eyes of a partial sister, but generally agreed to be so. His cheeks had the glow of health, his eyes, the finest in the world, the brilliancy of genius as soft and tender as an affectionate heart could render them, the same playful fancy, the same innoxious wit that was shown afterwards in his writings, cheered and delighted the family circle. I admired, I almost adored him.

Thomas Sheridan was acting at the Haymarket Theater and giving "Attic Evenings" in which he sang and recited. Richard was studying oratory, mathematics, Latin, fencing, and riding; he was also reading extensively. This was the period of nascent British radicalism, inspired by the

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unrest in the American colonies and by general fears of royal despotism. Sheridan was electrified by Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* and by Philip Francis's "Letters of Junius," of which he produced a satirical version.

The family soon removed to Bath, where Thomas Sheridan hoped to establish an academy of elocution and there to make use of his sons as "rhetorical ushers." But this grim prospect happily dissolved, for fashionable Bath found the idea of an Irishman teaching correct English speech to be ludicrous. As a friend of Sheridan's would relate, "The whole concern was presently laughed off the stage, and then Sheridan described his happiness as beginning. He danced with all the women at Bath, wrote sonnets and verses in praise of some, satires and lampoons upon others, and in a very short time became the established wit and fashion of the place."

Bath was an ideal place for a young man of Sheridan's visible talents and uncertain social status. As O'Toole demonstrates, "Nowhere else in England were the borders of polite society so permeable," and if Sheridan, as the son of an Irish actor, was something less than a gentleman, that fact was not so important in Bath as it would have been elsewhere. Society went there to amuse itself, and although it was a spa, the prevailing spirit of the place was one of festivity: as Horace Walpole quipped, people "went there well and returned home cured."

One of the chief attractions of Bath at the time of the Sheridans' arrival was a young girl named Elizabeth Linley, the daughter of an impoverished musician. A gifted singer and a striking beauty, she had been performing on stage from the age of eleven or twelve and had been "transformed into a virtual icon" of the town. Elizabeth seems to have had star quality as well as beauty and talent: she was painted several times by Gainsborough, and her recent broken engagement with a much older and richer suitor had already become the subject of a London comedy, *The Maid of Bath*.

When the Sheridans met her in 1770, both Charles and Richard inevitably fell in love. Elizabeth (or Eliza, as they soon called her) was being pestered by a persistent suitor, Captain Thomas Mathews, and she confided her unhappiness over his attentions to her two best friends, Lissy and Betsy Sheridan, who soon passed the information on to Richard. The idea that he might step forward, save Eliza from Mathews's importunities, and claim her for his own proved irresistible. He would show himself to be a better man than his brother; he would immediately gain fame and glamour by capturing the highly desirable "Maid of Bath"; and he would finally break free from his father. He and Eliza agreed to elope.

Once the decision was made, O'Toole points out, Sheridan "showed the qualities that were to mark his subsequent career—an extraordinary capacity to seize the moment, a genius for improvisation, and powers of persuasion that bordered on the miraculous." The two ran off to France, where they were married in a ceremony they must have known not to be legally binding, for they did not consummate the marriage.

Mathews challenged Sheridan to a duel; the Sheridans returned to England and a duel was fought (which Sheridan won), then a second (which he did not). These dramas, which Sheridan played to the house and milked for the maximum of publicity, made the young man a popular hero and even established him as a gentleman—at least up to a point—in a world where an actor was the social equivalent of a servant. He had begun his career with great éclat, and full in the face of conventional notions of social class, and from that moment on he had no further truck with contemporary pieties on that subject.

> I shall one of these days learnedly confute the idea that God could ever have intended individuals to fill up any particular Stations in which accidents of birth or fortune may have flung them. . . . *The Station* in which it has pleas'd God to place us, (or whatever the

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> words are) is not properly interpreted. And as God very often pleases to let down great folks from the elevated Stations which they might claim as their Birth-right, there can be no reason for us to suppose that he does not mean that others should ascend.

Sheridan had no intention whatever of remaining in his own station, and in the early 1770s he set about to prepare himself for public life. He and Eliza were properly married in 1773, and her career had necessarily to come to an end; a gentleman did not allow his wife to sing on stage.

Yet, uncomfortably enough, the only career in which he was capable of achieving the instant success and the income he now desired was a theatrical one. "He was caught between irreconcilable needs—to escape from the stigma of his theatrical connections and to attain public success which only the theater could bring him." And so in the summer of 1774, at the age of twenty-three, he settled down to write what would become *The Rivals*, a piece of work which drew heavily on his own life and recent adventures, with the ingenu couple, Lydia Languish and Jack Absolute, bearing a noticeable resemblance to Richard and Eliza themselves.

The Rivals opened at Covent Garden in January of 1775, to what we would nowadays call mixed reviews. Although there was general recognition of the author's brilliance, the play was felt to be rather extreme and grotesque where it should have been lighthearted. In a move that was to become the pattern of his theatrical career, Sheridan withdrew the play and rewrote it in ten days, then opened it all over again. This time it was greeted with wild enthusiasm, as audiences recognized timeworn theatrical clichés parodied, twisted, and made altogether fresh and attractive by a young playwright of extraordinary verbal and dramatic inventiveness.

Sheridan's theatrical interests were very soon overshadowed by political ones, as the first shots in the American War of Independence reverberated across the Atlantic. The American Revolution, which bitterly divided conservatives and a new breed of radicals, was the most troubled issue in England since the Jacobite uprisings. Sheridan was never in any doubt where he stood. Early in 1776 when George III's government called for a day of fasting and prayer for the success of the war, Sheridan published an openly seditious response in the form of a lyric ode.

> Courtiers, forgive the rhyming past,
> I'll tell how *I* mean to fast,
> And sanctify the day:
> So God protect me, as I mean,
> With heart all pure, and conscience clean,
> To *feast*,—and not to pray.
> Or, if I pray, my vows shall be
> That every child of Liberty
> May hail its parent's name;
> And every foe, and every slave,
> And ev'ry all-submissive knave,
> May glory in his shame.

Sheridan saw himself, as ever, as an Irishman, and to him the principles of Irish and American independence were identical.

David Garrick, who had owned the Drury Lane Theater for nearly thirty years, was at this time talking of selling up and retiring: Sheridan saw an opportunity to take over the theater, one of the greatest in Europe. He would need more money than he had, though, and to realize his ambitions he set out to write as commercial a comedy as possible. The result was *The Duenna*, a comic opera with music compiled by his father-in-law. Written with extraordinary speed, it opened in November 21, 1775 and ran for an unprecedented seventy-five performances at Covent Garden. By the beginning of 1776 Sheridan, between his earnings and his borrowings, had become part-owner and effective controller of the Drury Lane.

Fintan O'Toole is an expert on eighteenth-century theatergoing, and he displays his knowledge engagingly. "The underlying expectation of theater in Sheridan's time," he writes, "was not that it might reflect on

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politics but that it was a form of politics. . . . When Sheridan bought into Drury Lane, he acquired a direct relationship with the King, for Drury Lane and Covent Garden were the 'theatres royal,' operating under license from the King." These two theaters represented opposing political camps: Drury Lane was considered the opposition's theater, while Covent Garden, especially during the long administration of William Pitt the Younger, beginning in 1783, was the government's. "In taking control of Drury Lane," O'Toole writes, "[Sheridan] placed himself at a crossroads where culture and politics, money and sex, the real and the imaginary, met and mingled."

Sheridan's next and greatest triumph was *The School for Scandal*. The play remains to this day a crowd-pleaser and one of the standard repertory pieces in our dramatic literature. But in its time it was much more than that, an almost tangible expression of its historical "moment between the American Revolution and the French when a new world seemed to be in the making and that play somehow a part of it." Its principle themes—the deceptive nature of appearances, the fickleness of reputation, the often disreputable guises behind which goodness and honesty can conceal itself—were all ideas that were being aired in the more intellectual works of the contemporary *philosophes*. Sheridan's feckless Charles Surface and his upright but hypocritical brother Joseph functioned as metaphors for contemporary political and philosophical ideas.

Among other things, the play was an attack upon the current cult of sensibility, which, Sheridan implied, could too easily become a front for hypocritical prudery. In his early days at the Drury Lane, Sheridan had implicitly attacked the fashion for sensibility by reviving the then-unfashionable Restoration comedies, which had been superseded by "ponderous tragedies and sentimental comedies." Now, in his own play, he confronted it far more directly.

The play's impact was phenomenal. "Why can we not always be young, and seeing *The School for Scandal*?" William Hazlitt lamented many years later. "What would we not give to see it once more, as it was then acted, and with the same feelings with which we saw it then?" And in 1822 Charles Lamb wrote that "Amidst the mortifying circumstances attendant upon growing old, it is something to have seen *The School for Scandal* in its glory." Sheridan quickly followed up *The School for Scandal* with *The Critic*, his last comedy, a pure farce exposing the manifold absurdities of the theater business, in which actors were dizzyingly cast as themselves or versions of themselves, the backstage machinations of the scenic illusionists were laid amusingly bare, and the formal excesses of theatrical conventions of the period were mocked. He did not confine himself to backstage; as the title suggests, he also had fun with writers and critics, for whom he had little use. Sheridan would have agreed with Duke Ellington's critical dictum that if it sounds good, it is good; that was about as deep as he liked to get, and he had nothing but scorn for contemporary critical writing, inoffensive as it seems by today's standards.

As with *The Rivals*, Sheridan didn't actually get around to finishing *The Critic* until opening night was almost upon him. He did not produce the final scene until the fellow-owner of the theater, a Dr. Ford, locked him into a room with writing materials, food, and drink, and said he would not open the door until the play was finished. Sheridan, according to a contemporary, "took this decided measure in good part; he ate the anchovies, finished the claret, wrote the scene and laughed heartily at the ingenuity of the contrivance."

Sheridan's place in the world was now assured, his way cleared for his long-considered entrance on the political scene. The group to which he naturally gravitated was that of the younger members of the Whig oligarchy, presided over by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, and the savvy political maneuverer Charles James Fox. George III had toppled the Whigs

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from their long era of power, and they were now in noisy opposition. In the persons of Fox and Edmund Burke, the left wing of the Whig party combined radical chic with aristocratic glamour, and Sheridan fit in naturally. He became a regular at Brooks's, the group's preferred watering hole, and began a steamy affair with an available beauty.

In 1780 Sheridan was elected to Parliament as the member for Stafford, running on a popular platform of a shorter work day and the taxation of the rich rather than the poor. Except for very brief governments in 1782 and 1783, the Whigs, and Sheridan, were in Opposition for nearly a generation, during which period the arch-Tory William Pitt, Sheridan's nemesis, was prime minister.

Parliament was still to a great degree controlled by the monarchy, and the fact that Sheridan was inevitably disliked by the conservative George III induced him to look elsewhere for royal favor and influence. He found it all too easily in the spoiled, unprincipled person of the Prince of Wales (the future prince regent, later King George IV), who showered his favor on the Whigs purely as a way of defying the oppressive father whose power he so resented. In 1785 the prince had contracted a secret marriage with a widow, Mrs. Maria Fitzherbert. Public knowledge of his union with this fervent Catholic would have spelled disaster for the prince, for the Act of Settlement and the Royal Marriage Act forbade the monarch's marriage to a Papist; exposure would have cost the prince his throne and might even have jeopardized the monarchy itself.

Fox's disapproval of Mrs. Fitzherbert alienated the prince, who now turned to Sheridan, making him his confidential adviser. Sheridan urged discretion upon the couple, and when the question of whether or not the prince was married was brought up in Parliament, Sheridan rushed into the breach, managing to distract public fears with a speech that was a masterpiece of equivocation.

The marriage was successfully hushed up and eventually annulled, making way for the prince's spectacularly disastrous alliance with Princess Caroline of Brunswick. But Sheridan's discretion earned him the prince's difficult and demanding friendship for the next twenty years. It was a friendship that in the end would prove illusory and even harmful to Sheridan's career, "conjuring up," in O'Toole's words, "a tantalizing vision of great power always within sight and always out of reach."

Sheridan was as celebrated a speaker as he was a writer, possibly the greatest of the eighteenth-century orators. His most resounding triumph, *The School for Scandal* of his political career, was his role in the impeachment and subsequent trial of Warren Hastings, governor-general of India, for corruption and cruelty. Burke and Sheridan were the driving forces behind the trial, and Sheridan the star turn. In the impeachment hearing Sheridan, with an Agatha Christie-esque flair for melodrama, called Hastings himself as chief witness, then proceeded to deliver a five-and-a-half hour speech that left the House, for the first time in its history, in an eruption of cheering and applause.

But he had saved his big guns for the trial that followed. Public interest was at fever-pitch; tickets were being sold for as much as fifty guineas, and "Many fashionable ladies lost their shoes in the melee, some going into the hall barefoot." One of the contemporary MPs described "a rush as there is at the pit of the playhouse when Garrick plays *King Lear*." Sheridan spoke four-and-a-half hours the first day, then, after a hiatus of several days, finished his address with a peroration on true justice that left his audience in ecstasies.

> . . . the *real image—Justice!* I have now before me, august and pure, that abstract idea of all that would be perfect in the spirits and the aspirings of men; where the mind rises; where the heart expands; where the countenance is ever placid and benign; where her favorite attitude is—to stoop to the unfortunate; to hear their cry, and to help them; to rescue and relieve; to succour and to save!

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At last, with a cry of "My Lords, I have done!" he fainted histrionically into the arms of the waiting Burke. Edward Gibbon took the performance with a grain of salt: "Sheridan at the close of his speech sank into Burke's arms;—a good actor; but I called this morning he is perfectly well." Still, Sheridan's tour-de-force was one of the great public events of the era, remembered for the rest of their lives by those who witnessed it.

The ideas about the rights and responsibilities of man that Sheridan enunciated in these speeches held a special import in the context of the impending French Revolution, which was to create an irreparable fissure within the Whig party as Burke moved to the right, Sheridan to the left. Sheridan passionately attacked Burke in Parliament when Burke charged the French with having pulled down their laws, revenues, and industry. "What were their laws?" Sheridan demanded. "The arbitrary mandates of capricious despotism. What their justice? The partial adjudications of venal magistrates. What their revenues? National bankruptcy."

Although Sheridan was disgusted by the excesses of the Jacobins, he kept Girondin contacts and remained sympathetic to the basic tenets of the Revolution throughout the reactionary period that set in after England and France went to war in 1792. As O'Toole persuasively demonstrates, he even committed acts that would have been considered treasonous in that fearful time. He was sympathetic with the popular radical societies, agreed in principle with the use of force to uphold Irish rights, and joined with Lord Edward Fitzgerald in the Society of Friends of the People, a challenge to the anti-revolutionary wing of the Whig party led by Burke. He did not countenance the overthrow of the British state, but he saw fit to remind Parliament, apropos of the British constitution, that "We have, at this day, nothing in it that is beautiful, that had not been forced from tyrants, and taken from the usurpations of despotism."

Sheridan stuck to his political principals throughout his life: no small feat, at that time, for a self-made man without inherited wealth or surefire aristocratic influence who was patronized by the Whig oligarchs only so long as they continued to find him useful. In the conduct of his personal life he was less fastidious. He and Eliza, like many a modern glamour couple, had soon strayed from the straight and narrow. Sheridan enjoyed a long liaison with Lady Harriet Duncannon, the Duchess of Devonshire's sister, while Eliza was tempted by many suitors, among them the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV. By 1790 Eliza was writing to Mrs. Canning that "S and I shall most probably come to an amicable separation when I return to town. We have been sometime separated *in fact* as man and wife. The world, my dear Hetty, is a bad one and we are both victims of its Seductions."

A year later, Eliza was in love with the romantic revolutionary Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and pregnant with his child. She died, however, shortly after the little girl's birth, and Lord Edward and Sheridan, whose unusual friendship seems never to have wavered, decided that the child should be baptized as Sheridan's daughter. When little Mary died in infancy, the two men were equally heartbroken.

In 1795 Sheridan married Esther Jane Ogle, called Hecca, a flighty girl twenty-five years his junior. The aging and increasingly dissolute man was invigorated by Hecca's youthful presence, even imagining that he might once again succeed as a dramatist. And in fact he did write one more play, *Pizarro* (1799), a romantic fantasy in which the Indians defeat the Conquistadors and resume their peaceful lives. It was a tremendous box-office hit and remained a reliable standby at the Drury Lane until the late nineteenth century, but it has not aged well.

With Pitt's fall in 1801, Sheridan was finally in a position to seize power; he was urged to take a position in the administration of the new prime minister, Addington, by Addington himself and even by his old

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enemy, the king. Had he done so he could have had almost anything he wanted: a hereditary peerage, a government sinecure. Instead he refused, claiming, according to a friend, that "his receiving anything like emolument . . . from Ministers would *contaminate the purity* of his support and dishonour him forever."

Although Sheridan remained in Parliament almost until his death, his influence now began to decline. He became increasingly subject to depression and paranoia fuelled by alcohol. The grotesque caricatures of the elderly Sheridan from the pens of Gillray and Cruikshank testify to the Tory press's extreme dislike for "Old Sherry," but to revolutionary young men like Byron he was a consummately glamorous relic. The turning point was 1806, which brought the death of all the most notable of his friends and enemies: Pitt, Fox, the Duchess of Devonshire, and his brother Charles, with whom he had had a troubled relationship since childhood. With the disappearance of Fox and Pitt (Burke had died in 1797) Sheridan became an anachronism, the last of the great eighteenth-century orators.

Sheridan's private life also continued to deteriorate. His marriage was stormy; he drank far too much; he continued to pursue his one-time love Harriet Duncannon, sending her pornographic pictures, threatening her, and even crushing her hand. ("Confess," she wrote to a friend, "that the rarity of this makes it worth telling—people don't usually maim grandmothers for the sake of their *beaux yeux*. One may boast a little when it happens to one." He continued to be active in Parliament, especially in the cause of Catholic emancipation and enfranchisement in Ireland, but he would never hold power. When the leadership of the Opposition finally became vacant in 1807, he was visibly unequal to the task. "It has always been his ambition to lead the Op[position]," Harriet Duncannon observed, "and with talents and Eloquence to entitle him to any thing had he chose it, he has so degraded a mind and character that there is scarce anyone who has sunk so low as to look up to Sheridan as his chief."

In 1809 the Drury Lane burned to the ground, hideously underinsured. It was a financial disaster for Sheridan, who was pushed out of the business by his partner and the investors. With foolhardy courage, he chose this moment to sever, on a matter of political principle, his dependence on the powerful Prince of Wales. "His decision to do so, in the battered and vulnerable state in which he found himself, was the bravest of his life," O'Toole ventures, "far more courageous than any elopement, duel, or gamble. He knew that if he left the prince's protection and then failed to win a seat for himself, he would be at the mercy of his creditors." Fail he did, and as a result was imprisoned twice for his debts. He was compelled to sell nearly all his possessions, even his treasured portrait of Eliza by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Sheridan died destitute in 1816. He was given a splendiferous funeral at Westminster Abbey: the coffin of the man who had disdained to "hide his head in a coronet" was carried by six noblemen, and followed by a gorgeous procession of princes, dukes, earls, and viscounts. "Such a catalogue of Mourners!" wrote Samuel Rogers to Walter Scott. "And yet he was suffered to die in the hands of the Sheriff."

It is always tempting to draw a sententious lesson from the spectacle of golden youth sunk to aged debauchery, and such a moralizing strain was to become a regular feature in Sheridan's biographies. O'Toole, thankfully, does not go in for such easy conclusions. His sympathetic portrait makes it clear that the personal excesses that cost Sheridan so much in old age were the very same excesses that had prompted him to grasp for so much in youth, and that made his life the stunning success that it was. Sheridan wrote the best plays of his era; he had a long and colorful political career; he enjoyed the favors of some of England's most beautiful and intelligent women. A quiet old age by the fireside would have been absurdly out of character.

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A thoroughly modern Monet

by Karen Wilkin

When I first heard about plans for a show examining the work of Claude Monet in the twentieth century, I wondered why it was being done. Hadn't we seen an awful lot of Monet in the last few years? Special exhibitions, that is—not just the many examples of his work in this country's museums thanks to the hearty appetite of American collectors for Impressionist paintings. There was the Art Institute of Chicago's wide-ranging retrospective in 1994 and the Brooklyn Museum's "Monet and the Mediterranean" last fall. Earlier this year, there was the reunion of all eleven of Monet's vaporous 1877 images of glass-roofed sheds, engines, and clouds of steam in the absorbing exhibition "Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare," at the National Gallery, Washington. Two years ago, Monet's paintings of the 1870s and 1880s had a starring role in the Phillips Collection's "Impressionists on the Seine," while in the fall of 1995, the Metropolitan's "Origins of Impressionism" provided an illuminating context for his work of the 1860s, and about eight years back, a wonderful show at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts examined Monet's series of the 1890s—the stacks of grain, the poplars, and the façades of Rouen cathedral.[1] Cynics might say that Impressionist shows are always good box office, guaranteed crowdpleasers that assure a welcome boost to any museum's income. Aesthetes could retort that it's always a pleasure to see a good Monet and more of a pleasure to see a lot of good ones. But I kept wondering. Did we need *another* full scale Monet exhibition just now? Was there anything new to be said about this widely known and much loved painter?

As it turns out, "Monet in the 20th Century," the most recent of the seemingly endless celebrations of the master of Giverny, organized by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Royal Academy of Arts, London, made it clear that the answer is an unqualified yes, on all counts.[2] Casual and habitual museum-goers alike will be enchanted by shimmering views of London and Venice, opalescent canvases of the lily pond in Monet's garden at Giverny, gnarled "portraits" of his Japanese bridge, and immense, loosely scrawled, lyrical dialogues between water lilies and reflections. (Other institutions take note: the show was installed with more than customary generosi-

1 See *The New Criterion*: "'Origins of Impressionism' at the Met" (November 1994), "Claude Monet in Chicago" (November 1995), and "Manet & Monet at the Musée d'Orsay" (April 1998).

2 "Monet in the 20th Century" opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, on September 20, 1998 and will remain on view until December 27. The exhibition will reopen at the Royal Academy of Arts, London on January 23, 1999 and be on view through April 18. A catalogue, by Paul Hayes Tucker, has been published by Yale University Press (310 pages, $50).

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ty, which not only gave the pictures room to breathe, but diminished the impact of the crowds.) As a gathering of frankly beautiful pictures, the show was exhilarating, but what was perhaps more important, it made you approach Monet in a new way—not as the grand old man of *plein air* painting, but as a vigorous twentieth-century innovator. It was useful to be reminded that this quintessential Impressionist—the only member of the group whose work conforms to textbook definitions of Impressionism from start to finish in a long career—was not solely a man of the nineteenth century. Monet lived and worked for twenty-six years of the twentieth century. When he died, aged eighty-six, the first exhibitions of Fauvism and Cubism were almost twenty years in the past, the First World War had been over for nearly a decade, and the first Surrealist manifesto had been circulating for two years.

That "Monet in the 20th Century" met with an enthusiastic response from the museum-going public was hardly surprising given the charisma of its subject and the numbers of unabashedly gorgeous and accessible, albeit audacious, pictures included in the show. What was really remarkable was that even specialists were deeply engaged. Despite Monet's popularity, despite the steady stream of exhibitions devoted to him in recent years, despite the fact that many of the paintings at the MFA were utterly familiar, the Boston show's thoughtful selection managed to include some real surprises: a picture not seen outside of Russia since it was bought from Monet's 1904 exhibition at Durand-Ruel, another last on public view in 1909, and still another, remarkably enough, never before exhibited. And as expected, tickets sold briskly, no doubt delighting everyone concerned with the MFA's finances.

So much for pleasure, instruction, and profit, but is there anything—apart from those startling, unknown pictures—really *new* about "Monet in the 20th Century"? Again, the answer is an unqualified yes. The exhibition repeatedly raises the question of which works the painter considered to be finished and which he regarded as studies or works in progress. It addresses the difference between the pictures that Monet wished to represent him during his lifetime and those that, however deeply appealing to audiences in the second half of the twentieth century, he never parted with and that remained virtually unknown until twenty-five years after his death. By the simple means of documenting when (or if) a canvas left Monet's studio, whether or not it was included in an exhibition in his lifetime, and when it was first acquired by a collector, the exhibition's labels and wall texts, like the catalogue's captions, not only make us aware of what Monet judged to be a completed painting, but also provide a capsule history of taste in the first part of this century.

It is fascinating to learn, for example, that a lush, dappled painting, *The Water Lily Pond (Symphony in Rose)* (1900, Musée d'Orsay), had been bought from the artist by his dealer, Durand-Ruel, in November 1900 and sold the same day to the adventurous Parisian collector Comte Isaac de Camondo. The prominence of Americans as admirers of Monet's paintings in the early part of this century was evident from the frequent appearance of the names of collectors from Boston, Chicago, and even Denver, which, while interesting, is hardly news; more surprising is the discovery that a few enlightened Japanese art lovers bought pictures of the lily pond and its overhanging willow tree in Monet's lifetime, which must have greatly pleased a painter who himself collected Japanese prints avidly and with a discriminating eye.

At intervals throughout the show, the deeply engaging issue of how Monet regarded his own work was brought forth by hanging side by side paintings that were all but identical in theme, composition, and size, but differed considerably in their levels of density and unity: for example, three closely related horizontal lily pond pictures, all begun in 1918 (Musée des Beaux-Arts de

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Nantes, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and the Benesse Corporation, Okayama, Japan, respectively). The Nantes picture left Monet's studio in 1922, as the artist's gift to the friends of the museum. It is the most sparsely composed of the three canvases, with delicate clusters of water lilies barely indicated and pushed to the edges of the canvas. Rounded pads and spiky blossoms alike are reduced to fragile strokes, all but subsumed by broad, unifying washes of luminous light blue and yellow that conspire to create passages of brilliant spring green against a warm-toned ground. Loosely suggested reflections of clouds and willows drown the floating water lilies, so that the whole becomes a subtly inflected, unstable, and wholly ambiguous fabric of pale, radiant color.

By contrast, the Honolulu and Okayama pictures read as vigorous, energetic "drawings" in saturated color. Dense, rhythmic knots of line coil into acid green lily pads, rosy flowers, lavender cloud clusters, and deep blue water. The effect is substantial, but the lively, brushy surface is interrupted by glimpses of bare canvas, so that the scrolls of brushstroke threaten to unravel if you look away. To 1990s eyes, these are wonderful, suggestive pictures that translate perceptions of the ephemeral into the materiality of paint and gesture. But what did Monet think about them? They were still in his studio when he died, possibly still in progress, possibly serving as studies for other, even larger horizontal canvases of the lily pond, but not apparently seen as finished works. Such provocative comparisons not only made viewers alert to the pictures' radically different histories, but also made plain the discrepancy between what Monet presumably valued in his own art and the qualities present-day viewers have admired most strongly in his late work ever since it became widely known in the 1950s.

In the context of the show, the issue of what Monet believed was a finished picture seemed at first to be an insistent continuo, perceptible if you concentrated on the labels' helpful notes on the exhibition and sales history of each work, but seemingly less important than the qualities of light, space, weather, temperature, and place evoked by the pictures themselves—not to mention their glories in terms of pure painting.

Yet the question became increasingly pressing as you progressed through the show. The direct confrontation of works like the Nantes, Honolulu, and Okayama pictures served to focus attention on the problem in specific terms, while the question was also dramatized by an accumulation of evidence on a larger scale: by the contrast, for example, between the group of delicate water lily paintings of 1904–1908 that Monet showed at Durand-Ruel in 1909 (in Boston about half of the forty-eight canvases of that exhibition were reassembled) and the urgently scribbled, large-scale versions of the same motif that he executed about a decade later and never showed. The differences were impossible to ignore: the refinement, subtlety, and intimacy of the Durand-Ruel pictures versus the muscular sketchiness of the large water lilies that remained in the studio.

But just when you thought that you had come to terms with what constituted the public and the private Monet, the rules changed. Attentive study of the pictures and reading of the labels made it clear that from about 1919 to 1923, Monet sold a number of loose, gestural, saturated paintings, moderate in size, but as freely stroked and boldly composed as either of the "private" horizontal lily pond pictures now in Honolulu or Okayama. (The rippling green-gold *Weeping Willow* [1918–1919, Kimbell Art Museum, Houston], bought around 1922 by one of those daring Japanese collectors, was among these.) What is even more interesting is the history of one of the most "radical" of Monet's late pictures, a scintillating vertical view of the edge of the lily pond, painted in 1917 and now in the Musée de Grenoble. Woven out of cascading strokes of lapis blue and flickers of yellow and dull green, dotted with plunging cas-

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cades of pink and red, the picture shifts between a powerful suggestion of a specific place, time of day, and season, and the pure material intensity of paint. It makes both the Honolulu and Okayama pictures look a little—well—predictable. Yet in 1923, Monet gave it to the Musée de Grenoble "to encourage modern art," a fact that makes you think hard about how the aged painter saw himself, three years into his ninth decade. An equally brushy, robustly "drawn" canvas of a similar view, here keyed off of the confrontation of deep viridian green with sharp yellow-green, and threaded through with vertical bands of blue (1918, private collection) left the studio in 1919 for exhibition in Paris and New York. Yet a group of smoldering, ferociously brushed paintings of the Japanese bridge slicing across the center of the canvas (and one cool blue-green and white version), all painted between 1919 and 1924, remained with Monet until his death.

Being alerted to such contradictions—that the Japanese bridge pictures were essentially "private," but that almost equally daring works were sent out into the world, or that at eighty-three, Monet declared his presence as a modern painter with the Grenoble picture—made you look at everything in the show with new eyes, particularly the stunning selection of what may be Monet's most seductive works: the series of large canvases of his lily pond that preoccupied him from about 1915 until the end of his life. He had contemplated a series of mural-sized "Grandes Décorations" as early as 1897, and had begun to work on preparations for them in 1914, after having a special studio constructed so that he could work at the scale he envisioned. All through the First World War, Monet worked on the creation of his private paradise, his bid for immortality as France's most important modern landscape painter: a great decorative cycle of views of his water garden. It seems that the project was begun without any precise idea of what would happen to the pictures, but, at the end of the war, Monet's offer of a single large canvas to the state eventually led, through complex negotiations, to his donation of the many panels now installed in the Orangerie.

"Monet in the 20th Century" ended crescendo-like, with several galleries of pictures related to the Grandes Décorations, including an enormous two-panel horizontal water lily "nocturne," all milky silvery-mauve mists, with flickers of pale drawing—the curatorial coup of the painting never exhibited before. Although closely related, each of this group of large, poetic canvases remained distinct, talking to the others, but never fusing into the kind of all-encompassing, panoramic drug for the senses of the cycle at the Orangerie. The effect was salutary, reminding you that no matter how powerfully evocative these images of a pastoral idyll may be, their real potency lies entirely in the realm of painting.

In Boston, the dazzling finale drove home the fact that the large water lilies were studio pictures, compounded equally from observation, memory, and painterly invention. If there is anyone left who thinks of an Impressionist painting as an unedited slice of nature, a purely optical, on-the-spot response to a set of specific, transient conditions, painted in a single nature-inspired campaign, then the heroic, ambitious, nuanced paintings in "Monet in the 20th Century" (especially the vast lily ponds from the painter's last decade) should finally lay the idea to rest. Obviously, these over-sized canvases were not painted on the spot. Monet's studio buildings adjoined his house and garden, out of sight of the lily pond. That Monet was, from the very beginning of his long career, intensely tuned into nuances of light and shade is a foregone conclusion; even in his earliest seaside paintings, made when he was an aspiring young iconoclast, he never got a tone wrong. But spending time with a large group of lily pond pictures from the end of that young iconoclast's life made clear how much these late works depend not only on the artist's sensitive response to something seen (and seen frequently, in changing conditions), but also on the artifice of painting.

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The late lily pond pictures were plainly worked on slowly, over extended periods. Monet glazed and scumbled; he carefully washed new colors over the texture of existing bold brushstrokes in order to preserve a sense of spontaneity while actually allowing his pictures to evolve over a long period of time. Like the effect of rapid execution, the paintings' potent evocation of ephemeral moments is an illusion. Monet suggests transience metaphorically, through the formal means at his disposal. He plays on your emotions with color and tonality, knocks you off balance by extending his canvases beyond the limits of your field of vision, disconcerts you by making the literal, undeniable surface of the canvas congruent with a fictive expanse of water, and further disrupts your sense of fact and fiction, stability and mobility by deliberately confusing up and down. Monet ignores the time-honored convention of the center of interest, weighting every portion of his canvas equally with an accumulation of discrete, subtly inflected events. And if this wasn't enough, he calls up that most elusive of phenomena, the reflection, with strokes, washes, and gestures at a scale that detaches paint from illusionism and makes each mark read as exactly what it is—a dollop of pigment placed by a searching hand.

Big scale, gestural brushstroke, all-overness, disorienting space, and material assertiveness, of course, are not simply the qualities that made Monet's late pictures radically new in their own time, but the very characteristics that make them so accessible to viewers accustomed to the work of the Abstract Expressionists and the Color Field painters. In fact, when the late paintings finally began to be exhibited and sold in the 1950s, they were eagerly claimed, retroactively, as part of the lineage of the large-scale, all-over American abstract picture. It's easy to see why. Monet's late works not only provided justification for what the painters of the New York School had been doing, but they also pointed the way for the next generation. It is impossible, for example, to see one of Jules Olitski's delectable spray paintings of the mid-1960s without thinking about the Monets at the Orangerie. An interesting essay by Michael Leja in the catalogue of "Monet in the 20th Century" examines just how Monet's posthumous reputation was affected by being entwined with the reputations of Jackson Pollock and his colleagues. At the MFA, the issue was underlined by a modest "footnote" show, drawn from the museum's own collections, that traced Monet's influence on such artists as Ellsworth Kelly, Helen Frankenthaler, Larry Poons, and Olitski, among others.

The catalogue of "Monet in the 20th Century" is an unusually luxurious effort, with remarkably good color plates, including twelve fold-outs of the large horizontal water lily paintings. Among shorter efforts by other scholars, a long essay by the art historian Paul Hayes Tucker scrupulously and informatively analyzes Monet's practice and examines the context in which he produced his late pictures. Like the show, the catalogue is enriching and edifying. Of course, for unalloyed delight, nothing can equal a direct encounter with those ravishing canvases. If you miss "Monet in the 20th Century" in Boston, where it remains through Christmas, you can see it in London this spring. And while you're there, you can take the Chunnel train to Paris and visit the Orangerie.

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"Alternating currents"
by Mary Jo Salter

1. Reading in the dark

Imagine, if you will, a hotel
room fronting Niagara Falls. Helen
Keller has been brought here by
her teacher, Annie Sullivan,
to meet their good friend Dr. Bell,
inventor of the telephone,
who has long worked with the deaf.
Helen, thirteen, already known
around the world for having thirsted
at the well of knowledge in her own
backyard, where Sullivan had spilled
water in one hand and spelled
the word into the other, now
lets him lift her hand in his
like a receiver, and gently press
it flat against the window's ear.

The glass is cold. And through her splay
fingers a liquid thunderbolt
of vibration charges and discharges
at once, so thrilling in its force
that she nearly tastes the spray—
though, one must add, the girl is made
of words more than of anything
by now; she feels what she's been told.

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Teacher gave her half the world
she knows. How to fathom, then,
the ingratitude that surfaces
in dreams? At Radcliffe, later, where
Teacher sits through every class
and unabsorbedly (for she's
a medium, a conductor, and what
greater sacrifice?) transmits
directly to her charge's hand
all the professors' lectures, she
appears sometimes in Helen's nightmares
as a quarrelsome tormentor,
driving her to "an abyss, a perilous
mountain pass or rushing torrent."
Once "I saw her robed in white
on the brink of Niagara Falls."
Her costume seemed to be an angel's.
When she dropped into the whirlpool,
Helen, frantic, dove in to pull
Teacher from danger; the figure wrestled
out of her arms and swam to shore
untwinned. And this—the unthinkable
thoughtlessness of one who loved her—
was the purest terror.

But how lucky she is! Instead of toys
they bring her famous men: William
James, W. E. B. Du Bois,
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mark Twain.
One day she'll touch Caruso's voice.
Somebody in Gardner, Maine
has named a lumber vessel for her.
Hers is a fate that launched a ship.
At her fingertips, the Braille
armies of words amass: she scans
the *Iliad* in the original.
(What is original? She hasn't
dared to ask since, at eleven,
a story she had thought she thought
up wholly by herself had proven

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to be the tale of a "plagiarist.")
Sometimes she is just as glad
not to tire Teacher, and will work
late into the night—but then,
she writes to kindly Mrs. Hutton,
"one wearies of the clash of spears
and the din of battle." No one hears
the punctured pages turning as
she soldiers on alone, the blind
reading the blind: the lovely Helen
following Homer in the dark.

2. The final problem

Across the ocean, an oculist,
Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle,
plots the ultimate crime. He boasts
to his mother, "I think of slaying Holmes . . .
& winding him up for good and all.
He takes my mind from better things."
Twirling the weapon in his hand,
he pens the title: "The Final Problem."

Deflecting blame, perhaps, he sets
the end on foreign soil. A train
of reasoning takes Holmes and Watson
to Switzerland, fleeing that regal
rival, the "Napoleon
of crime," the spider in a vile
network of radiating evil.
(Too bad. Had Conan Doyle more art, he
would have created Moriarty
long before.) Face to face
at last, detective and nemesis—
their twin defiance heightened by
the pointed altitude of the Alps—
peer at each other in a bliss
of imminence. The great men tumble
in a wrestler's grip together

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down the Reichenbach Fall—unseen
by Watson, who runs up too late.
Yes, that's very good. He'll call
helplessly down the abyss
to hear nothing but his staggered voice
crack open on the cliffs in echo.

Yet, blinded by the cataract
of his invention, Conan Doyle
can't see the problem isn't final.
Holmes can no more (the public's logic
runs) have perished in those falls
than Falstaff had on the battlefield.
Or had at rough words of Prince Hal's.
Like Shakespeare, who obeyed the queen's
command to resurrect his rascal,
in time the doctor bows to pressure,
dries off his hero, sends him home—
and calls the stories *His Last Bow*.
It's not, of course. Some characters
wake perpetually in the middle
of their lives: the rooms in Baker Street
are forever fixed in place
like letters Holmes speared with a jack-
knife to the mantelpiece; his fiddle
case is never closed.

Left unsolved: how a B-plus
stylist, Conan Doyle, who preferred
what he called "psychic research," and,
touchingly gullible, obtuse,
finished up his own career
believing in fairies, should have had
the cool to track down the great sleuth
within himself, the cynical
logician who could see in the dark.
Liar, master of disguise,
Holmes elegantly cloaks the thin
transition of two eras: loyal
subject of The Exalted Person
(unnameable Victoria), he's

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already prone to modern ills.
Ennui is The Final Problem—for which
there's but a seven-percent solution,
or target-practicing indoors
(poor Mrs. Hudson!); with the flair
of one in deep despair, he marks
the whole wall in a manly Braille:
"V. R. done in bullet-pocks."

How in the world could Conan Doyle
originate a deathless myth?
"When you have eliminated all
which is impossible," as Holmes
repeatedly explains, "whatever
remains, however improbable,
must be the truth."

3. Hearing shadows

President Garfield has been shot,
and Alexander Graham Bell
hops on the train for Washington
to find the bullet. It's lodged somewhere
in the body of the President,
and though he's not a medical man,
Bell hopes to provide a tool.
His "induction balance," as
he calls it, like his "photophone,"
is work that follows in a line
from the telephone—which made his name
six years ago. Disengaged
sometimes from himself, he wonders
if he really *had* invented it.
Or was it someone he'd read about?
That's not a doubt to speak aloud,
with everybody and his brother
daring to claim the patent. "The more
fame a man gets for an invention,"
he once confided to the page,
"the more does he become a target
for the world to shoot at."

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The photophone has given him
a synesthetic thrill he's known
only in poetry. (And though
he's far too busy to notice how
he phrases things, that letter to
his father last year was poetry.
"I have been able to hear a shadow,
and even have perceived by ear
the passage of a cloud across
the sun. . . .") Insert selenium
in the telephone battery; then throw
light upon it, thus altering
resistance, and varying the strength
of the current sent to the telephone.
An image, then, may have its own
correspondent sound. Simple.

"Watson, come here, I want to see you":
that's all that people can retain,
tending, as people will, to miss
the point. It wasn't just Tom Watson
on the other end of the line,
it was the Telephone in Real
Form he'd wired at last to an
Ideal one floating in his brain.
The question is if he can do
the same again: the deadly ball
sits humming somewhere silently
for his machine to answer it.

He's swept into the White House by
a private entrance. How to enter
the President's body without harm?
He scans the skin with his instrument,
hoping to trigger an alarm.
Three days later, the victim drained
of a once florid cheer, the bullet
like a whole note sings a clear
tone for one measure. Bell returns
to his lab in Massachusetts, fiddles

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in vain, more misery intervenes:
his baby boy is born and dies.
Then Garfield does. The autopsy
reveals the bullet had always lain
too deep for a safe extraction—
which hadn't, in fact, been necessary.
A death caused mostly by infection:
doctors' unwashed hands.

In the history books, poor Garfield
is footnoted for being killed.
But Bell goes on to reinvent
himself, a man who—as he'd said
when the telephone was still afloat—
is lost in fog, and yet can tell
his latitude and longitude.
He takes notes on condensing fresh
water from real fog; conducts
genetic trials on sheep (but fails
to name any of them Dolly); constructs
one flying machine—less like a plane
than a giant paper honeycomb—
after another. "I have not
the shadow of a doubt," he writes
in 1893, "the problem
of aerial navigation will
be solved within ten years." The Wrights
will get there first. But in his way,
as always, he's right on the money.

4. A tangled skein

"From a drop of water," Watson reads
aloud from a magazine, "a logician
could infer the possibility
of an Atlantic or a Niagara
without having seen or heard of one
or the other." He slaps this down
on the table. "What ineffable twaddle!"

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It's his first wrong move. The essay's
author, we've foreseen, is Holmes,
his brand-new roommate, about whom
this "Study in Scarlet" proves the first
in scores of chronicles that he—
that is, Dr. Watson—writes.
Dr. Conan Doyle's rough draft
called it "A Tangled Skein." And we
might too, this craft of authorship.

So let them, on my tangling lines,
call the overloaded switchboard
for souls they're linked to, all at once:
Keller and Sullivan, Conan Doyle
and Watson, Bell and Watson, the two
two-watt Watsons, Sullivan
and Watson (either one will do:
all three are listening to this list
and taking notes), Holmes and Watson,
Holmes and his flip side, Moriarty
(not yet heads-first over the falls),
and since the distinction's always fine
between detection and invention,
Holmes and Bell, then Holmes and Bell
(a Dr. Joseph Bell) whom Conan
Doyle had partly modelled Holmes on.

What are they saying? Something about
"the scarlet thread of murder" that runs
"through the colourless skein of life."
That's Holmes—who, in his arrogance
(but no one else can do it right),
kills himself a little with
more cocaine in his scarlet vein.
Something more about resentment
of whatever we have cause to call
ourselves. And yet we'd ask for foils,
for second fiddles, for noble, dim
Watsons as constant witnesses.
Holmes to Watson: "It may be that

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you are not yourself luminous . . .
but you are a conductor of light."
Bell to Watson: "Come here, I want
to see you." Holmes to Watson again:
"Come at once if convenient;
if not convenient, come all the same."
And this: "Come, Watson, the game's afoot!"

And what's the game? Something about
taking a message. A scarlet thread
of reception branches in the brain,
a filament, brilliantly unclear
except for clearly being there—
like the lightbulb waiting to switch on
in the head of half-deaf Edison—
and Conan Doyle is not entirely
wrong, as he joins the conversation,
to add: "I felt that my literary
energies should not be directed
too much into one channel. . . ."

Bell bellows into the phone: "Hurrah!"
(Nobody can convince him
to settle for a simple "Hello.")
"Hoy! Hoy!" These days, an older man
embodying an anagram
(as a boy A. Graham Bell had gone
by the alias of "H. A. Largelamb"—
destined, it seems, to experiment
on sheep), he doesn't use the phone
very often any more. The ring
annoys him at the dinner table;
besides, his wife—the winningly
named Mabel, the original
Ma Bell—is deaf. She writes to us
instead, an essay on the art
of lipreading. A misnomer. The kiss
of unheard words with thought must come,
she says, by marking body clues
(eyebrows, hands); on the lexicon
of context; and, since very little
is ever understood at once,

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on empty-headed readiness
to miss a detail. You can feel
your way back to the blanks.

Which is the decoding task of Holmes.
The scarlet "Rache" the victim scrawls
on the wall is quickly misconstrued—
if you only read one language—
as "Rachel." But it means revenge.
One letter. What he seeks may hinge
on anything. The dancing men,
a child's line of stick figures, turn
murderous with a hypothesis—
the commonest figure must be "E"—
and Holmes unlocks the cryptogram
so well he tricks the criminal
to present himself for arrest in his
own dancing language: "Come at once."
The flesh made word, the word made flesh.

Half-blind Annie Sullivan,
nineteen, untaught, is summoned to
Tuscumbia, Alabama to tame
a child who doesn't know the name
of anything. Then she has a thought.
"I had no idea a short while ago,"
she writes a friend, "how to go to work;
I was feeling about in the dark;
but somehow I know now, and I know
that I know." She's going to pretend,
for now, that Helen understands.
Keep talking. From a drop of water,
a single word, a Niagara
untangles in their hands.

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Letter from Dublin

The ironic tiger

by Richard Tillinghast

I can hardly recall a conversation in Dublin this past summer when no one mentioned the "Celtic Tiger," the irritating catch phrase commonly used to describe the runaway Irish economy. This boom or bubble is transforming the country, in particular the capital city—and not necessarily for the better. While prosperity is obviously welcome, it is happening too fast. Before winning her independence from Britain in the 1920s, this country, with its large landed estates, was practically a feudal society. A commonly expressed witticism asserts that Ireland has leapt straight from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, bypassing the twentieth century altogether. One might even enlarge that exaggeration by asking whether the Romantic movement ever hit Ireland—in which case the leap began somewhere in the late eighteenth century.

What has drawn me to visit Dublin once or twice a year over the past decade has nothing to do with the highly suspect Gaelic feline mentioned above. Dublin is an incomparable if constantly threatened gem of Georgian architecture, the contemplation of which freshens one's sense of pure form. Like the music of Mozart, Dublin's streets and squares and monumental public buildings are a Euclidean fragment of the eighteenth century cast adrift in the perilous waters of the present. Its literary world is as contentious, and even vicious, as anywhere on earth, yet this is a city where poetry thrives. The theater here, though tiny by comparison with London's, is vital and innovative. Above all, Dublin is a stage where personality dominates and wit is savored through an ongoing network of conversations. Given the city's complex and tragic history, in which hardship and disappointment have been the norm, it is not surprising that the dominant mode is irony.

One strenuous dissenter in the unironic brave new world of Italian suits, penne and arugula, air-kisses and mobile phones is the poet Derek Mahon, who last year published *The Yellow Book*, a sequence of twenty poems, most of them in rhyming couplets. Its title and many of its references evoke the fin-de-siècle of a hundred years ago:

> My attic window under the shining slates
> where the maids slept in the days of Wilde
> and Yeats
> sees crane-light where McAlpine's fusiliers,
> site hats and brick-dust, ruin the work of years.
> The place a Georgian theme-park for the
> tourist,
> not much remains. . . . ("Night Thoughts")

("McAlpine" is a construction company; "site hats" are hard hats.)

When one looks up to refresh one's eye with a view of the Georgian rooftops and chimneypots that make the vistas in this city so delightful, the view these days is all too likely to be intruded upon by a building crane wheeling across the sky like some genetically altered praying mantis. It is all

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about money, naturally. Mahon comments resignedly: "foreign investment conspires against old decency,/ computer talks to computer, machine to answering machine."

Another poem from *The Yellow Book,* entitled "shiver in your tenement," contrasts our present moment to the literary scene in Dublin "long ago in the demure '60s/ before the country first discovered sex." Familiar figures from those days, sporting wide-brimmed black hats acquired from clerical supply stores, included the poets Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke, the novelist and humorist Flann O'Brien, and the playwright Brendan Behan: "Those were the days before tourism and economic growth,/ before deconstruction and the death of the author,/ when pubs had as yet no pictures of Yeats and Joyce/ since people could still recall their faces, their voices." The poem speculates about the relation between art and repression: "Nothing to lose but our chains, our chains gone/ that bound with form the psycho-sexual turbulence,/ together with those black hats and proper pubs." Mahon's irony is frequently tinged with bitterness; the poem's attack is provocative, reactionary, and uncompromising: "Those were the days: now patience, courage, artistry,/ solitude things of the past, like the fear of God,/ we nod to you from the pastiche paradise of the postmodern."

To return to the Celtic Tiger: Peter Somerville-Large in his excellent chronicle, *Dublin: The Fair City,* (1979, revised edition 1996) to which I am indebted, quotes Jonathan Swift's animadversions in the 1730s on excessively rapid growth, as well as John Faulkner's complaints in 1757 in the *Dublin Journal* about the "rows of empty buildings, and our builders still proceed in their folly." Just as those grousings were being voiced, the city was entering a golden age, and the empty buildings of 1757 did after all find tenants. Eighteenth-century speculators were no doubt driven by greed as surely as their twentieth-century counterparts; the difference is that the buildings that went up during the Georgian period were uniformly handsome.

The Georgian row house is as simple and perfect a design idea as the nail, the pencil, or the hammock. Two or three times taller than its width, it is a rectangular brick box whose plain verticality, topped by an unobtrusive gray-slated, hipped roof with a tidy little row of chimney pots, makes it one of man's most pleasing creations. In a typical townhouse, three windows wide—like 82 Merrion Square, which in the 1920s belonged to W. B. Yeats—the door is set off-center in the farthest right of the ground floor's bays. The columns or pilasters that flank the doorway, the modest flourishes of fancy brickwork above the windows, and the round-arched fanlight above the door are the house's chief ornaments. The classical elegance of this style of domestic architecture is complemented by the choice of building materials. The brick of which eighteenth-century Dublin was constructed has been mellowed by Ireland's damp weather, as well as the coal fires lit to combat it, so that the houses glow russet, peachy or amber in the thin northern sunlight.

The tragedy is that so much of this irreplaceable Georgian city has been destroyed. Many grand mansions became tenements in the bleak years that followed 1801, when Britain, alarmed by the rebellion of 1798, instated the Act of Union, dissolving the Irish Parliament in order to rule the country directly from Whitehall. Almost overnight Dublin lost its status and began declining into the backwater familiar to readers of Joyce's *Dubliners*. More damage was done in the 1960s, when it was easier for speculators to get their ugly business past the public because many people associated the old buildings with the centuries of English domination. Preservationists were caricatured as "a consortium of belted earls and their ladies and left-wing intellectuals."

The upwardly mobile citizens of the new nation were glad to see the old piles pulled down. One particularly infamous episode involved the condemnation, as "structurally unsound," of numbers 13 to 28 Lower Fitz-

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william Street by the Electricity Supply Board. The ESB enlisted the English architect Sir John Summerson who, to his everlasting shame, described the block in question as "simply one damned house after another." This was what Somerville-Large calls "the longest Georgian street in Europe." Its lines of perspective look straight out past the rooftops of the city up toward the Dublin Mountains. And under the wrecker's ball these houses fell. All, naturally, in the name of progress and modernization. The lovely row of brick townhouses was replaced by a row of buildings that looks like a prefabricated savings and loan office in Sioux City, Iowa.

If much has been destroyed, however, much remains. Fitzwilliam and Merrion squares retain a unity of design. And set within Dublin's fabric of domestic structures are ten or a dozen public buildings—their grey stone counterpointing coolly the red brick rowhouses—that one never tires of looking at. The Bank of Ireland, formerly the seat of the Irish Parliament, with its semi-circular colonnades curving around both sides of a central, pedimented portico, is one of the most beautiful and surprising buildings in the world. It achieves its effects on the horizontal plane and does so by presenting a curved facade. The result is a modesty often missing in classical structures, which can be cold and presumptuous. Inside, the intimate scale of the chambers built for parliamentary use gives it a charm that is characteristic of Irish Georgian architecture. In the introductory epistle to her 1806 novel, *The Wild Irish Girl*, Lady Morgan made an acute comparison between the first and the second cities of the British Empire: "This city is to London like a small temple of the Ionic order, whose proportions are delicate, whose character is elegance, compared to a vast palace whose Corinthian pillars at once denote strength and magnificence."

Dublin stretches along the north and south banks of the river Liffey from its westernmost suburbs to where the river empties into the Irish Sea in the east. James Gandon was Dublin's greatest architect—and like many who have made major contributions to the cultural life of this island, he was English; his two finest buildings are both on the north quay of the Liffey: to the west, Dublin's legal center, the Four Courts, to the east, the Custom House. With their oxidized copper domes showing prominently against both the sky and the colors of other buildings, they define the city's skyline. Or they did before the city fathers allowed the historic Liberty Hall, heavily bombarded by British gunboats during the Easter Rising in 1916 but fully restored later, to be pulled down and replaced by a multistory glass box totally out of scale with the rest of the city, where a four-story building is exceptionally tall. This abomination is topped by a wavy tin rooftop ornament resembling a cartoon toupee.

The architectural historian Maurice Craig characterizes Gandon as eclectic and mannerist. Certainly Gandon does something surprising with the domes of both of his two masterpieces. The Custom House, two ample stories lighted by tall windows, topped by a smaller course with windows half the size of those below, gives the impression of being long and low because it spreads out horizontally, sitting parallel to the Liffey. Atop this long, low block sits a Palladian dome which looks surprisingly small in relation to the horizontal expanse it surmounts. In the Four Courts, my favorite of the two, Gandon laid out, at the extended arms of an ex, the four courts after which the building is named: King's Bench, Chancery, Exchequer, and Common Pleas. These four arms meet in a central, octagonal hall, over which the architect has floated a glorious dome upheld by a tall cylindrical ring of columns. Like the dome of Saint Paul's in London or of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the dome of the Four Courts is an assertion of majesty. The majesty of empire.

I have rooms for the summer at Trinity College, south of the Liffey. Like most residents of this part of town, I seldom venture

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to the northside except to go to the theater at the Abbey or the Gate or to attend traditional Irish music sessions at Hughes's, a pub up behind the Four Courts. One day, however, I crossed the Ha'Penny Bridge to the north quay and walked past the Four Courts to Collins Barracks, formerly the Royal Barracks, where many holdings from the National Museum in Kildare Street have been moved. One can see from the size of Collins Barracks how large a garrison the British maintained in Dublin. In his discussion of the Four Courts, Maurice Craig notes that its architect would have endeavored to sound-proof the legal chambers from the noise of military parades: "We know from Gandon's *Life* that anxiety was felt at the time lest the troops marching daily from their barracks to the castle, with fife and drum, with flam, drag, and paradiddle, might disturb the slumbers of the Bench."

The barracks, with its severe classicism, is the perfect architectural representation of order and power. The massive elevations, three granite stories over solid rusticated arcades, look out over dizzyingly vast parade grounds. It is ironic, and thus fitting, that the National Museum used this setting to mount an exhibit last summer called "1798: Fellowship of Freedom," commemorating the unsuccessful rebellion that took place two hundred years ago. That 1798 was a failure is one of the tragedies of Irish history, not least because the leadership, the United Irishmen, represented Protestants, Catholics, and Freethinkers, with some of its strongest support in fact coming from the Presbyterians of Ulster.

When Ireland did eventually win her freedom in the war of independence following the 1916 Easter Rising, the new nation, defining itself as Gaelic, Catholic, and nationalist, became anti-intellectual and inward looking to an almost pathological degree. Thanks to the Church's control of intellectual life, none of the country's modern literary masterpieces could be bought in Ireland. Had the rising of 1798 succeeded, the new nation would have been founded on Enlightenment principles similar to those of the American Revolution, an important model for the rebellion's leaders such as Wolfe Tone and Lord Edward Fitzgerald. And incidentally, Dublin's architectural legacy would then have been seen as Ireland's national heritage, not the imposition of a colonial style, and would have been preserved rather than vandalized.

The most powerful drama I have seen this summer is *The Weir* by twenty-seven-year-old Conor McPherson. The play consists of a series of ghost stories told in a pub in rural Ireland and illustrates two points: that the new generation of Irish writers still has the strong narrative gift, and that the supernatural still holds a grip on the Irish imagination—and not only for those who live in thatched cottages. The pub's regulars, while retailing their stories absorbingly, distance themselves, dismissing the stories as a kind of local color, "an ould cod." Ironically, the character whose experience of the paranormal is most heartfelt and disturbing is not one of the countrymen, with their colorful turns of phrase and old-fashioned ways, but a young woman down from Dublin, taking a break from her yuppie life to recover from a painful personal episode. *The Weir* is living proof that so-called "text-based" theater has nothing to apologize for, and that like *Waiting for Godot*, a play based on talk can still hold an audience's attention. It moves to the West End this autumn and to New York in 1999.

At the Abbey Theatre, Conall Morrison has directed a new production of Dion Boucicault's 1860 melodrama, *The Colleen Bawn*. Dismissed as a theatrical hack by admirers of serious modern Irish drama, Boucicault has found a new appreciation among commentators here for his anticipation of the twentieth century's technological approach to entertainment.

In *The Colleen Bawn*, the poteen-swilling Myles-na-Coppaleen dives into a Killarney lake to save the Colleen from drowning after the villain charmingly played by Pat Kinevane pushes her in. In some nine-

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teenth-century productions the lake was represented by a large aquarium. In this production a smoke machine provided an illusion of the mist-shrouded waters. At the preview I attended, the smoke machine went out of control and engulfed the first few rows of theatergoers, whose coughs and vigorous attempts to wave away the smoke made the rescue scene especially hilarious. An observer trying to gauge the national mood might draw the conclusion from this extravagant production that contemporary Ireland, as represented by its national theater, is in a buoyant enough mood not to shy away from mounting a nineteenth-century parody of itself, stage-Irishness, poteen jug, drunken priest, and brogues all around.

Whether by happenstance or design, while the Abbey was presenting Boucicault's Myles-na-Coppaleen upstairs, the Peacock Theatre downstairs—the Abbey's experimental wing—was mounting an adaptation of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, by Flann O'Brien, better known by the nom de plume Myles Na Gopaleen (a variation of Boucicault's spelling), whose *Irish Times* column, "Cruiskeen Lawn," was the "Doonesbury" of its time. The column's title alludes to a song from *The Colleen Bawn*. The story was clearly baffling to the audience the night I went—some package tours had bought blocks of tickets for their clients—and indeed would not have made much sense to anyone who had not read the book. What were the punters to make of Mad Sweeny, half-naked and smeared with dirt and blood, crouching up in a tree or on a chair during the novel's poker game, where the Fairy (a disembodied voice) raises and checks from her perch in the pocket of the Pooka MacPhellimey's overcoat? They did respond in a spirited fashion to a recitation of O'Brien's famous bit of inspired doggerel in praise of porter, one stanza of which I will give here:

> When money's tight and is hard to get
> And your horse has also ran,
> When all you have is a heap of debt—
> A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN.

One Sunday evening, displaced by a film crew from the lounge at the Shelbourne Hotel where I had gone for tea, I retreated down Lower Baggot Street to Doheny & Nesbitt's public house. Having secured without competition the front snug of the pub, there among the honest, plain wood and down-at-heels Edwardian decor I read randomly in O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, hoping to clear my head of Tigerism and recover the feel of old Dublin's ironic anti-Romanticism. For such refreshment, Myles, like the "pint of plain" he espouses, is "your only man." Romanticism, as I suggested at the beginning, never found fertile soil in Ireland; irony, as I have also mentioned, is too pervasive here to support extravagant flights of fancy.

The last word in my letter goes to Flann O'Brien on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His narrator and some friends are leaving the pub after an evening of drinking:

> . . . a small man in black fell in with us and tapping me often about the chest, talked to me earnestly on the subject of Rousseau, a member of the French nation. He was animated, his pale features striking in the starlight and his voice going up and falling in the lilt of his argumentum. I did not understand his talk and was personally unacquainted with him. But Kelly was taking in all he said, for he stood near him, his taller head inclined in an attitude of close attention. Kelly then made a low noise and opened his mouth and covered the small man from shoulder to knee with a coating of unpleasant buff-coloured puke. Many other things happened on that night now imperfectly recorded in my memory but that incident is still very clear to me in my mind. Afterwards the small man was some distance from us in the lane, shaking his divested coat and rubbing it along the wall. He is a little man that the name of Rousseau will always recall to me.

I raise my glass to the hope that Dublin will never forget the wise and skeptical Myles Na Gopaleen.

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Theater

"Corpus" delecti

by Mark Steyn

If a play isn't worth dying for, maybe it isn't worth writing.
—Terrence McNally

We can excuse McNally his fervor. He is, in many respects, an unlikely convert to the Salman Rushdie club. Is *The Ritz*, a farce about a garbage man on the lam who takes refuge in a steam bath, worth dying for? Is *Next*, a comedy about a middle-aged movie theater manager suddenly ordered to take an army physical, worth dying for? Is *The Rink*, a Liza Minnelli/Chita Rivera vehicle about a run-down roller rink, worth dying for? Liza and Chita are always to die for, darling, but one assumes McNally meant his cry of defiance rather more literally. Still, over the years he evidently thought all three worth writing.

By the time *Corpus Christi* actually opened, the defense had somehow managed to reverse itself: if a play isn't worth writing, surely it isn't worth dying for. In the spring, the Manhattan Theatre Club had announced a new McNally work about a "gay Jesus-like figure." The Catholic League and other religious groups protested, the theater received a couple of death threats, and a few nervous corporate sponsors decided it might be wise to withdraw. At which point, the MTC cancelled the production. Now they were faced with protests from far more powerful figures, ones who knew how to get op-ed pieces on artistic freedom into the respectable newspapers—actors, directors, playwrights, Larry Kramer, Athol Fugard, Tony Kushner. . . . So the MTC resurrected their "gay Jesus," not on the third day but a week later, after taking the precaution of installing metal detectors. Now comes the happy ending: the play was lousy. So thoughtful critics and editorialists could say to all those religious whackos: c'mon, guys, get a sense of proportion; if you fellows hadn't made such a big deal, no one would even have noticed this play; next time, skip the threats to burn down the theater and just leave it to word of mouth. The play's badness gave everyone the chance to be even-handed: as *The New Yorker*'s Nancy Franklin put it, "I'd rather have seen a better play, but I also would not want to have been prevented from seeing this play."

Which begs a question: from the Catholic League's point of view, what would constitute a "better" play about a gay Jesus? As McNally worked on *Corpus Christi* over the summer, it was reported that he'd taken the public outcry on board and decided to cut out some of the offensive language and explicit sex scenes in order not to distract from his theological message. This missed the obvious point: it's the theological message that's offensive. McNally's Christ subscribes to the traditional injunction to "love one another," but, as the "King of the Queers" rather than King of the Jews, he expresses that love by sodomizing his apostles.

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The novelty in this latest skirmish for "artistic freedom" is the battleground—not some remote field way out on the edge, but slap bang in the center of midtown. Terrence McNally is no Andres Serrano, the celebrated NEA-funded crucifix-urinater. Rather, he's what passes for a bankable Broadway playwright these days—*the* Broadway playwright, the only one left. He's got a shelfful of Tonys and he's the only guy in town who can sit at his desk and know that just about anything he writes will be produced. To give you an idea of how un-Serranoesque he is, his other current production is the Ford Centre's splashy musical *Ragtime*. This is not your run-of-the-mill, "transgressive" artist trying to get a little attention but a canny mainstream boulevardier who fell in love with the theater when he was taken as a six-year old to see Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun*. *Corpus Christi* is "gay Jesus" gone primetime: even the matching button-down shirts and khakis he and his disciples wear suggest nothing so much as the ultimate celebrity Gap ad. Indeed, I could swear I spotted Andrew Sullivan in the Last Supper scene.

McNally's last big hit at MTC was *Love! Valour! Compassion!* in which a group of theatrical gays queened around a big house in Dutchess County. *Corpus Christi* is the sort of thing they might have had a giggle about late in the evening: Jesus and his disciples, they were just like us, weren't they? A group of men who hung out together, no women in sight, stands to reason they must be gay. You don't seriously think they'd spend all that time together if they weren't having sex? McNally's play is not so much a work of imagination as a work of lack of imagination, of an inability to imagine a world where sex is not the center of everything—where sex is not, in fact, a religion. In that sense, *Corpus Christi* is also the logical reductio of a process that has been gathering steam in the American theater during the long march of the AIDS epidemic—the need to find a spiritual validation of homosexuality.

Directed by Joe Mantello (of *Love! Valour!* etc.), the production is eager to please. Once you pass through the metal detectors, as at the airport gate, you enter the auditorium, where, as at the airport gate, folks are milling around. Thirteen of the millers—all fetching young men, brimming with boyish charm—are the cast. One of them starts talking to us: "We are going to tell you an old and familiar story," he says. "The playwright asks your indulgence, as do we, the actors. There are no tricks up our sleeves, no malice in our hearts, We're glad you're here." Everything is so *reasonable*. As at the airport gate, we then sit around for two hours waiting for the thing to take off. But it never does.

The tone is set by the opening scene, which proceeds at a trance-like sleepwalking-through-Jello pace. John the Baptist, in a voice which presumably is meant to be solemn and reverential but instead just sounds flat and slow, introduces each cute disciple as follows: "I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you. . . ." McNally's theology is built on a pun: God, in a brief cameo appearance, instructs Joshua (the renamed Jesus figure) that his message will be that "all men are divine"—in both senses of the word, for how can such a tousled-haired washboard-abbed pert-buttocked cutie not be "of, from, or like God; sacred." We are all entitled these days to "our God," as the President put it in his mea sorta culpa back in August. There is an advantage to custom-building "your" God: Mr. Clinton, for example, is not very specific about "his" God, but, if I had to bet on it, I'd say that the President has in mind a sort of divine lounge act, relaxing in a celestial hot tub, surrounded by angelic cocktail waitresses, the kind of God who understands the pressures a guy can be under. God made man in His image, but today man makes God in his. McNally's God is a God of narcissism. As Joshua reassures one "marginalized" disciple: "We're each special, we're each extraordinary, we're each divine."

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One assumes from his title that McNally did not set out to write a trivial play. *Corpus Christi* is its own trinity, referring to the body of Christ—and thus its sexual needs and those it arouses in others; the holy day honoring the body of Christ in the Eucharist; and McNally's own home town, on the Gulf Coast of Texas. The play doesn't quite take place in modern Texas or in ancient Palestine, but instead proceeds with a foot in both camps—an awkward balancing act summed up by Pontius Pilate's question to Christ: "Art thou a queer, then?" I wondered for a moment why McNally hadn't updated the story entirely to our time, but then it occurred to me, as no doubt it did to him, that a prophet peddling a religion of sexual gratification in remote parts of Texas would evoke only those looneytoon cults one reads about from time to time, usually following a mass suicide: such a "religion" might even seem exploitative.

And, while it might have been more daring to confine his queer retelling to the original time and place, it would also have cramped McNally's style: he wouldn't have been able to have Joshua/Jesus attend Pontius Pilate High, where he's bad at football and instead is the kid they get to sing "I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy" (from *South Pacific*) in the school play. Our Lord discovers his homosexuality when Judas comes on to him in the men's room during the school prom. (There's a sentence I never thought I'd get to type.)

"D'you know who's playing Joshua?" I asked my companion. "A handsome mount." "Undoubtedly," I said. "But what's his name?" But I had misheard. Joshua is played by Anson Mount, a clean-cut puppy-eyed Messiah leading his nice young men across a set whose raised floating wooden platform seems designed to underline the troupe's hermetic purity. There are no leather-clad nipple-ringed hunks, no shrieking queens. As a gay cohort, Joshua and his disciples exude a wholesomeness closer to, say, Rupert Brooke and the Neo-Pagans before the Great War. Of course, as their name suggests, the Neo-Pagans took a cooler view of themselves than McNally's photogenic gay apostles. As the play's supporters see it, the playwright's message is unobjectionable: no one should be persecuted for being different. But McNally is not asking for non-persecution—for "tolerance"—but inviting us to celebrate gayness: Joshua is divine because, as he puts it, he pioneered "the Hershey highway" (if you have to ask, you probably shouldn't).

At such moments, McNally seems to be arguing not the divinity but the banality of homosexuality. He seems unable to conceive of any impulses other than sexual ones. The jokes are the sort that seem smart only to undergraduate revues. Mary, with child: "I'm a virgin, Joe." Joseph: "Nobody knows that better than I do." Judas boasts about his equipment. One of the Magi brings the newborn babe a Flexible Flyer sled. Anyone with an idle half-hour could find their own glib, college-sketch parallels. What McNally fails to do, seesawing between Corpus Christi and Jerusalem, is make the gayness integral to the story: it feels awkwardly grafted on top.

The most arresting scene has Joshua confronting the spectre of AIDS: the apostle Philip, an HIV-positive prostitute, is healed by Joshua with an erotic, intimate embrace. McNally's "theology" is at its sloppiest here: for, if "the Hershey highway" is the stairway to heaven, how come it also leads to disease and death? In their efforts to endow AIDS with a spiritual dimension, every play from *Angels in America* to *Rent* to McNally's *A Perfect Ganesh* has shied away from this question: that the defining act of homosexuality, practiced on the extravagant scale that most homosexuals would seem to require, has led to devastation.

The aspect of McNally's play that's most touching is the serio-comic telling of a gay childhood in Middle America. We're told that gay teens, forced to repress their sexuality, are "often" driven to suicide. But their fatalities are infinitesimal compared to those of gay teens encouraged to celebrate their sexuality: in New York, San Francisco,

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and other major cities, the gay population has HIV infection rates of 50 to 60 percent. I don't personally think sex is worth dying for, any more than a Terrence McNally play is. But clearly many gays feel differently, and a more courageous playwright might have taken his controversial concept all the way and pondered the notion of sex as an act not only of conversion but of martyrdom. It's telling that McNally shadows every big event in the original—the Nativity, the Sermon on the Mount, the Crucifixion—except the one that counts: the Resurrection. He simply leaves it out: the best bit of the story utterly defeats him. Jesus' terrible suffering on the cross is at the core of what he means to us. To assume blithely that an unhappy gay adolescence in Texas will suffice as an equivalent is the most absurd narcissistic complacency.

McNally does, however, push the hot buttons du jour. Thus, Joshua marries his disciples Bartholomew and James—to each other, that is. "You have broken every Commandment!" roars an outraged Rabbi. Really? Joshua hasn't lied, stolen, murdered, committed adultery, or built graven images. Commandment-wise, he seems only to have broken the one about not coveting thy neighbor's ass. Would a real Rabbi bandy articles of faith so carelessly? It seems incredible. Such a dialogue beggars belief, unlike the rest of the play, which buggers belief—not least in McNally's explanation of why Judas betrays his Lord: hell hath no fury like a gay ex-lover scorned. "Sold to the fag haters in the priests' robes!" cries Judas (Josh Lucas)—and the deed is done.

The curious thing is that, in striking contrast to Salman Rushdie's tormentors, "the fag haters in the priests' robes" would find most of McNally's play unobjectionable. Not just Bishop Spong but your average enlightened Episcopalian would share Joshua's belief that we're all special, we're all divine, and gays in committed relationships should be allowed to marry in church. Hundreds of American and Canadian Anglican ministers recently issued a joint pastoral letter proclaiming their "understanding" of gays and dissociating themselves from the less progressive pronouncements forced on the recent Lambeth Conference by their ferocious, fire-breathing African brethren. (Many Africans take the view of Zimbabwe's Dr. Robert Mugabe, who says that homosexuals are "lower than dogs" and homosexuality a filthy colonialist habit; the country's first post-colonial head of state, the Rev. Canaan Banana, was recently tried for homosexual rape.)

For Episcopalians, with dwindling market share, it may make sense to reposition themselves as a specialty service catering to a highly targeted demographic. But it's happening elsewhere, too. Earlier this year, during the worst ice storm of the century, the pastor at my Baptist Church, apropos of nothing in particular, told us in his sermon that we shouldn't be afraid of "other sexualities." I cast an eye over the congregation: the town's widow women, leathery north-country ladies in pick-up trucks; our forest fire warden and Police Chief, sturdy plaid-clad Yankees; a few dairy farmers, a turkey farmer, a grandmotherly Town Clerk. . . . Fear of other sexualities didn't seem an obvious priority, especially in an ice storm. But we listened politely. Even in northern New England, you're aware that *The Village Voice* may be on to something with its recent front-page boast: "It's a gay world. Straight people just live in it."

Yes, indeed. And straight people's "transgressive" views never get a look-in at the Manhattan Theatre Club. In November, in conservative Alaska, about 70 percent of voters approved a constitutional amendment reserving the institution of marriage for couples composed of a man and a woman. But, in liberal Hawaii, another 70 percent voted much the same way—to approve a legislative ban on gay marriage. In Fort Collins, Wyoming, where the brutally beaten Matthew Shepard died in hospital and spurred a national crusade for "hate crimes" legislation, an ordinance to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation was rejected by voters. Even in Ogunquit, a

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picture-postcard Maine seaside village where many a gay tourist has passed a happy weekend antiquing, a gay rights ballot article was defeated.

About fifteen years ago, Britain's doughty anti-porn campaigner Mary Whitehouse brought a successful prosecution under the ancient (and generally neglected) law of blasphemy against a gay newspaper which ran a poem imagining Christ's erotic fantasies as he hung on the cross. A similar prosecution shut down Harvard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* in which a centurion's anal rape of a Druid is meant to symbolize British "occupation" of Northern Ireland. On the whole, I prefer America's First Amendment freedoms, but I find it somewhat inconsistent that the same people who champion McNally's right to put on his witless provocation of a play are the same people urging Congress to pass "anti-hate" legislation restricting the right of religious groups to express reservations about homosexuality. Compared to almost everyone else in our shrill hysterical society, "religious bigots" are surprisingly tolerant. Take, for example, the Easter edition of *The Mirror*, a weekly newspaper in Montréal. On page three is an advertisement for *Resurrection*, "the queer dance event of Easter weekend," featuring an oiled muscular hunk, nude except for several phallic symbols over his crotch, his glistening thighs flanked by two urinals. This "queer dance event" was a benefit for Montréal Queer Pride/Divers Cité 98, whose corporate sponsors proudly display their logos underneath the twinkling stud: Canadian Airlines, American Airlines, Glaxo Wellcome. . . . We must be properly sensitive towards persons of color, persons of orientation, and persons of gender, but we can be sneeringly contemptuous of persons of faith, appropriating their most sacred imagery for the crassest of purposes even on the holiest day in the Christian calendar. Even if it is a gay world and straights only live in it, it might be nice—just for the sake of variety—if the theater were to encourage a little "transgression" from the other point of view. Not so long ago, relatively straightforward biblical renderings were big hits on Broadway: whatever you think of, say, Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures* (1930), its presence on the Main Stem exemplified a theater that hadn't yet given up on Mr. and Mrs. America. Now, to play the Bible straight, you'd have to be a musical, like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Godspell* (*Corpus Christi* is a sort of tuneless *Gayspell*). Today, the gay cheerleading of America's theater and its churches is testament in both cases to an acknowledgement of retreat. But what's crippling the theater is its stultifying political and cultural homogeneity—the way its views on virtually any subject are a given, even before you pass through the metal detector: the theater is "anti-homophobic" literally, in its fearless love of the same. That's why the offstage rows are so much more dramatic than the onstage soppiness, both in the case of McNally's play and also *Rent*, where the community spirit that the show champions has been dealt a severe blow by the ongoing legal dispute between the late Jonathan Larson's estate and the dramaturge who claims she wrote significant portions of the work. There's more dramatic truth in the lawsuit than in the libretto.

On the opening night of *Corpus Christi*, as McNally and Joe Mantello struggled across two hours to nail their cardboard cutout to the cross, one theatergoer, an MTC subscriber since the Seventies, pledged her support. "I wouldn't have dreamed of not being here," Ellie King told *The New York Times*. "When I heard they might cancel the production, I was furious. This has nothing to do with religion. This is theater."

Almost right: this has nothing to do with religion. Or with theater.

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Art

Van Gogh in Washington

by Mario Naves

The short and tragic life of Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) forms the basis of one of the most pervasive myths in the history of art. The story of the impoverished artist who lives in obscurity is an archetypal one. What magnifies its power—and poignancy—is that the artist's genius is "discovered" by society only after his untimely death. That this was the actual tale of Vincent van Gogh should not stop us from being leery of the haze such a story can generate. And in the case of van Gogh, the haze is dense. He was, after all, a character of uncommon intensity: not simply destitute and gifted, but psychologically troubled. Add to this mix self-mutilation, illness, suicide, and a revolutionary artistic moment and one has the makings of a saga that not only Hollywood can appreciate, but the rest of us as well.

One irresistible facet of the van Gogh myth concerns the painting *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890). It has long been rumored to be the last canvas he painted before he shot himself in July 1890. Scholars have their doubts about the veracity of this story, but attempts to make the point otherwise are futile. The "deeply entrenched tradition" (as Richard Kendall has it) of the final painting is too compelling to remedy. Its stark and simple composition, wherein twisting pathways lead to nowhere and crows hover over a strangely welcoming sky, has the makings of an omen. What it also has are the makings of a masterpiece. In *Wheatfield with Crows* van Gogh achieved a pictorial ferocity that is staggering. The blue of the sky, in particular, is so vivid that one is likely to think it caused by a trick of museum lighting. It isn't. That blue is van Gogh's and it is electrifying. *Wheatfield with Crows* can seem, in its severity, like both the beginning and the end of expressionism. Indeed, the painting's wallop makes the rest of the artist's oeuvre pale in comparison. How, one wonders, could van Gogh have topped a picture such as this had he lived longer?

Wheatfield with Crows serves as the finale to "Van Gogh's Van Goghs" an exhibition at the National Gallery of work from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.[1] The Dutch museum, currently undergoing renovation and expansion, has allowed seventy of the artist's paintings to travel to the United States. The artist's popularity guaranteed the National Gallery a hit, but what does that guarantee the viewer? A wait in line, certainly, and, the day I attended the show, galleries so congested as to make the F train from Queens seem spacious. This is the dilemma of the blockbuster: How does a cultural institution provide access to art

1 "Van Gogh's Van Goghs" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington on October 4, 1998 and will be on view until January 3, 1999. The exhibition will reopen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on January 17, 1999 and remain on view through April 4. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Richard Kendall, has been published by the National Gallery (160 pages, $37.50).

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without undermining the encounter with overcrowded galleries? Hype has its part to play in this phenomenon, but so does a need on the part of the museum-going public for quality—quality, I would argue, of a distinctly hand-made nature. To question the wisdom behind blockbusters isn't being unrealistic or snobbish. It's an attempt to grapple with the complexities of aesthetic experience in a culture that, too often, makes it all but impossible.

"Van Gogh's Van Goghs" is intermittently exhilarating, often interesting and generally a letdown. The unevenness of the exhibition has its roots in the genesis of the collection itself. Theo van Gogh, Vincent's supportive and infinitely patient brother, inherited the artist's paintings after the latter's death. Theo, however, did not long outlive his brother—he was dead six months later. The paintings then became the responsibility of Theo's wife, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. (The rest of the van Gogh family would have nothing to do with the work.) Convinced of her late brother-in-law's genius, Johanna set out to advance Vincent's reputation by mounting exhibitions of the work and making public his correspondence with Theo. Having learned about the business of art from her husband, who worked for the dealers Boussod et Valadon in Paris, Johanna proved adept in the distribution of Vincent's canvases; she made certain that important pictures were sold to major dealers and museums for (as she had it) "the sake of Vincent's glory." Van Gogh-Bonger also knew a thing or two about public relations. A mere two years after Vincent's death, the painter Richard Roland-Holst griped that van Gogh-Bonger was "blinded by sentimentality" and encouraged the notion that Vincent's paintings were "the illustration of his sorrowful life-drama." Long before Kirk Douglas and Irving Stone, the van Gogh legend was in motion.

What the collection of the Van Gogh Museum consists of, then, are the leftovers that came down from van Gogh-Bonger to her son Vincent Willem and, finally, to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation. Writing in the catalogue, John Leighton, the director of the museum, proves himself a realist by pondering what the collection might have been had the work not been dispersed. Still, the museum does have its share of pivotal works, including *Wheatfield with Crows*, *Trees and Undergrowth* (1887), *The Bedroom* (1888), *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (1889), and a half-dozen self-portraits. The collection also gives a good sense of the trajectory of van Gogh's development: from Millet-influenced realism through impressionist experimentation and, then, to the artist's signature canvases. What we aren't given is a consistent case for Vincent's merits as a painter. While there are some fascinating curios here—like *The Courtesan (after Eisen)* (1887), wherein van Gogh pays homage to the Japanese prints he loved—too much of the show is given over to pictures like *Flying Fox* (1885) or *Emperor Moth* (1889), works of marginal documentary interest and meager aesthetic quality. It is paintings like these that set the tone of the exhibition.

As it is, "Van Gogh's Van Goghs" will best be appreciated by specialists: those willing to leave no so-so painting unturned in the cause of scholarly research. There is value to such investigations, but even Vincent groupies must have a hard time stomaching the dour, Dutch genre paintings, up to and including the famous *The Potato Eaters* (1885). This painting is a keystone of the collection and does evoke (in van Gogh's words) "bacon, smoke, [and] potato steam." It also displays the artist at his earnest worst. The image is not only grossly sentimental, but also clumsy in its drawing and murky in its color. The paupers huddled around the dinner table aren't ennobled so much as stereotyped—marionettes of virtue. The leap van Gogh would make between paintings of this type and the work that would follow his journey to Paris in 1886 was nothing short of tremendous. Even so, he would never shake the pictorial awkwardness of the Dutch period and it is this awkwardness that bears closer scrutiny in understanding van Gogh's art.

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The drabness of van Gogh's early work can make one wonder why he continued painting at all. In this respect he recalls Paul Cézanne, another artist whose early efforts evince no world-shaking talent. Unlike Cézanne, however, the Dutch painter would never fully comprehend painting as a metaphoric medium. For van Gogh, the canvas was a surface to be covered, rather than inhabited or explored. Even in his mature work, objects, spaces, and figures never quite sit comfortably within the painting's structure. We might suspect that these cramped areas of incident are the conscious distortions of an artist driven to maximize the cathartic timbre of his art. Yet van Gogh's quirks never integrate into a greater unity; instead, they clunk. This can be seen early on in a painting like *Head of a Woman* (1885), wherein dabs of paint lie on top of the canvas rather than within the painting. Similarly, in the presumably more advanced *The Zouave* (1888), the head and neck of the title figure jut out of their surroundings as if they were pasted on the canvas. These are the paintings of an artist whose skill at navigating pictorial space is iffy. To argue otherwise is to give in to the expressionist fallacy that pictorial coherence is an impediment to emotional authenticity. Of course, van Gogh's authenticity in this respect is irrefutable and does compensate—or, rather, overwhelm—the ricketier aspects of his paintings. Yet rickety they are. I suspect we get a truer conception of van Gogh as an artist if we think of him less as a proto-modernist than as an inspired primitive.

In a letter of 1882, van Gogh wrote that "I want to get to the point where people say of my work: that man feels deeply, that man feels keenly." This need wasn't based in aesthetics; it was based on the dictates of van Gogh's psyche. The reality of expressionism is just that: the imposition of the artist's mental state of being onto everything he touches. It would be unjust, however, to suggest that van Gogh's art was nothing more than a vibrantly colored species of navel-gazing. In fact, his art only becomes convincing once it forsakes observational accuracy for self-expression. The National Gallery provides an almost pedantic lesson on this point by hanging, side by side, *Self-Portrait as an Artist* and *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (both 1887–1888). In the former, van Gogh's pointillist facture attempts to describe mass, but does so in a fussy and overworked manner. In the latter, however, naturalistic light is discarded for a, shall we say, psychological aura. Here van Gogh's staccato chunks of paint radiate from the artist's gaze, giving the canvas an unnerving energy. It's little wonder that his finest figure paintings are self-portraits: van Gogh was, ultimately, incapable of relating to anyone but himself.

Anyone, it should be noted, but not anything. The paintings that make up van Gogh's legacy, and it is not a small one, are his landscapes. While he may have been drawn to landscape because it reflected his psychological state—think of the roiling and malevolent force of his wheatfields—van Gogh also found an artistic ballast in, say, the gnarled byways of a tree branch. On a practical level, the absence of the figure, or a figurative focus, was less likely to underscore his failings as a draftsman. The multiplicity of the natural world lent itself to van Gogh's vision in a way that the particulars of the human form did not. The unstoppable rhythms of his art found their equivalent in the mutability of nature, the latter tempering van Gogh's excesses without sacrificing their fervor. A painting like *Wheatfield with Crows* is that of an artist stepping outside of himself for a measure of clarity and connection; it also reaffirmed his own fiery humanity. In his finest landscapes, van Gogh achieved the mastery he so arduously longed and worked for. An exhibition dedicated solely to them would be, one feels, an event of consequence. As for "Van Gogh's Van Goghs," let's just say that it would be wiser to see the collection once it returns to Holland. The lines are apt to be more manageable and the Rijksmuseum is right next door.

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Music

Derailed in San Francisco

by David Mermelstein

Experience tells us that great plays don't always make great operas. Indeed, precisely the inverse seems to hold true: first-rate operas are often born of second-rate source material. The melodramas of Belasco and Sardou, for instance, are barely remembered today, save as the inspiration for some of Puccini's finest work. True, Verdi managed to put his inimitable stamp on three Shakespeare plays, but his achievement was the exception. Most of the time, good plays are best left unmolested by operatic metamorphosis. Even when the results turn out relatively successfully (Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* or Aribert Reimann's *Lear*), a play, by its continued popularity alone, can haunt the opera it prompted. If the opera is itself mediocre, the comparison will be devastating.

Such is the case with André Previn's operatic treatment of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which received its world premiere at the San Francisco Opera on September 19.[1] It was intended as a highlight of the present season, but one has to wonder about any work conceived by an impresario rather than a composer, for the moving force behind this magnum opus was not André Previn but Lotfi Mansouri, the San Francisco Opera's redoubtable general director. In a message appearing in the *Streetcar* program, Mansouri refers to the premiere as "a dream of mine for nearly twenty years."

Yet just because the inspiration for a *Streetcar* opera wasn't Previn's doesn't automatically mean the work is devoid of merit. A composer should, in theory, be able to craft a remarkable piece at someone else's prompting. Unfortunately, to judge by the music, Previn's heart wasn't in this endeavor. Even with the composer in the pit on the ostensibly auspicious opening night, there was little sense that a great, or even good, work of art had been unveiled. The excitement that was practically palpable in the War Memorial Opera House lobby before the curtain went up was almost immediately dashed as the generically moody, vaguely menacing tones of Previn's score filled the hall. These were atmospheric but superficial strains, without a musical center of gravity or an emotional core.

Streetcar is Previn's first opera, and his lack of confidence with the form is everywhere apparent. Mansouri himself admits that he had approached Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim for this project previously, but they, wisely, turned him down. Previn, it seems, was more naive, thinking he could transform Williams's drama (complete with a ready-made diva in the form of Blanche DuBois) into an opera proper. But there is very little that is proper in this overwrought tale of clashing cultures and rampant sexuality.

1 One of the premiere performances of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, taped at the War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, in September, will be broadcast December 30, 1998, on PBS.

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Previn is a musician of concrete talents. He is a fine jazz pianist and a musical arranger who claims four Academy Awards as proof of his prowess. He has also written two musical comedies and numerous film scores. More to the point, his credentials in the classical arena are impeccable. He studied composition with Joseph Achron, Ernst Toch, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, and conducting with the great Pierre Monteux. He is an accomplished concert pianist and has served as music director of several internationally recognized orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Pittsburgh Symphony, and the London Symphony Orchestra. Yet as a composer of "serious" music, Previn has never made much of an impression, though not for want of trying. Renowned artists like the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the violinist Gil Shaham, and the sopranos Kathleen Battle, Sylvia McNair, and Barbara Bonney have recorded his works for such major labels as Deutsche Grammophon, Decca/London, and Sony Classical. Yet even when performed by these talented musicians, Previn's coolly modern scores emerge as accessible but not affecting, polished but not profound.

And so it goes with *Streetcar*, an opera in which, sad to say, there is not a single memorable musical moment. Instead of developing a signature sound that includes motifs for the quartet at the heart of this opera (Blanche, Stanley, Stella, and Mitch), Previn blends brass, strings, and winds into a rambling, indistinct underscore. Plaintive strains reminiscent of Copland intermingle with passages bearing a strong resemblance to the lush film scores of Franz Waxman, Leonard Rosenman, and Alex North (who wrote the music for Elia Kazan's film version of *Streetcar*). Only occasionally do short-lived jazz riffs appear, including one straight from the Herb Alpert songbook. How odd that Previn, so steeped in jazz himself, missed this opportunity to break new ground with a jazz opera, which, after all, seems a sensible way to approach a work set in New Orleans. Perhaps the composer feared that such an effort would land *Streetcar* in the same no man's land to which Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has long been consigned.

More disconcerting, especially given that conventional narrative is slavishly adhered to here, is Previn's disregard for various operatic conventions. Instead of creating a score that includes repeated themes, Previn has written a through-composed text, and as a result, this *Streetcar* is far more a play set to music than an opera. The unenviable task of preparing a libretto from Williams's play fell to Philip Littell (who was previously the librettist for another San Francisco Opera world premiere, Conrad Susa's *Dangerous Liaisons*). And it may be that the restrictions imposed on Littell by the Williams estate ultimately hamstrung Previn. For though Blanche is given relatively extended solos at times, they are hardly arias. Moreover, there are no ensembles in this opera. A raucous quartet would, of course, have been perfect during one of Stanley's boisterous poker nights, but Previn chose not to write one. Nor did he pen a trio for Blanche, Stanley, and Stella, though it could have been employed to marvelous effect. And despite some possibly potent pairings, Previn has avoided duets, too. In the event, the glittering cast that assembled for opening night did its best, but the shortcomings of the work seemed to weigh even on them, as one sensed a desire among the singers for greater collaboration, for union through song.

The talented soprano Renée Fleming was reportedly Previn's second choice for Blanche. But no matter. As the evening wore on, she grew more comfortable in her challenging role. She laid on the Southern charm at bit thickly—though Blanche does, too—but after overcoming some trouble projecting (or was it just opening-night jitters?), Fleming delivered a purely sung, dramatically nuanced performance. She was especially effective in the Act II scene with the Young Collector (Jeffrey Lentz), por-

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tentously intoning the words, "So late . . . so late . . . so late . . ." She also made a point of repeatedly turning her head from sources of light, as Blanche should do. In the final scene, after much agitation, she mustered a preternatural calm, concluding on an effortlessly placed high note.

Soprano Elizabeth Futral, as Stella, sang even more impressively, with warm lyricism and incisive enunciation. Though Blanche lands the big scenes, Stella is in many way the tougher role, for she must divide her affection between Stanley and her sister, attempting for as long as she can to favor them equally. Futral navigated such shoals with ease, earning sympathy at every turn.

But baritone Rodney Gilfry had the most difficult part of all, singing Stanley. It is nearly impossible to separate this character from Marlon Brando, its stage creator; the actor lent menace and fascination to the part, and no one can hope to eclipse his iconic status in the role—even when the character sings rather than speaks. And yet the lean and handsome Gilfry was as effective as anyone could be. He brought a feral intensity to Stanley that seemed utterly natural, and he sang with crisp resonance, even through a superfluous Southern accent.

There is, however, the larger question of Stanley as an effective villain. Subtleties communicated on the dramatic stage are not so easily transmitted on the operatic boards, and Stanley's brutishness, which is mitigated by his love of Stella and confusion over Blanche, does not translate well to singing. Stanley is no Scarpia or Iago, and the impact *Streetcar* makes is the less for it. As Mitch, Stanley's friend and Blanche's putative suitor, tenor Anthony Dean Griffey made much of a thankless role. A beefy man, he brought unusual grace to a part that might have been played as a clod in lesser hands. The achievement was only heightened by his powerful and attractive voice.

As the San Francisco Opera Orchestra was conducted by Previn, it's hard to take issue with how the score was conveyed. Certainly, the orchestra, so finely tuned over the past six years by music director Donald Runnicles, played responsively and cohesively. Previn, always reticent on the podium, led the ensemble with admirable sang-froid, although one might have wished to see greater passion in his ministrations.

Michael Yeargan's revolving sets were scrim-covered, iron-framed boxes with tilted walls. Save for a sweeping curved staircase and some grillwork on the balconies that suggested the Vieux Carré, the exteriors were decidedly minimalist. But the interiors were richly detailed, with a cluttered kitchen (battered icebox included) and bedroom effectively conveying the cramped quarters shared by Stanley, Stella, and Blanche. Yeargan's costumes, too, favored veracity, a wise choice given this opera's overall commitment to literalism. It was, however, Thomas J. Munn's lighting design that made the most favorable impression. Thanks to Yeargan's translucent sets, Munn had an even broader canvas on which to play with hue and shadow. And his sometimes blood-red, sometimes ghoulish-green sky was as much a part of the action as any singer on stage. His suggestion of morning light was particularly ravishing and set the mood more effectively than anything Previn managed in the score.

In retrospect, Previn should have refused Mansouri's offer to transform one of America's greatest plays into a music drama. (*Long Day's Journey Into Night* is another work composers may wish to avoid tampering with.) The temptation is obvious: augmenting an already classic work holds the possibility that one can trump an established master. Of course, few people have accomplished that neat trick. Previn will go down as one who tempted fate only to falter, as a man whose reach exceeded his grasp. It's a human enough failing, one Blanche and Stella and maybe even Stanley would understand. The insightful Williams knew that depending on the kindness of strangers is a risky business. Now, Previn also knows.

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Concert notes

Mourning Becomes Electra, by Marvin David Levy, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote that there are no second acts for American lives. While that observation remains contestable, the resurrection this fall of Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in a new revised version, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago proves that there are definitely second acts in the lives of American operas.

Mourning Becomes Electra was adapted from Eugene O'Neill's six-and-a-half hour dramatic trilogy, which transfers Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to a New England seaport just after the Civil War. Levy's depiction of the haunted Mannon family's history of illegitimacy, insanity, murder, and incest had a highly publicized premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1967, with a cast starring Evelyn Lear, Marie Collier, John Reardon, and a young baritone named Sherrill Milnes. A performance in Germany followed two seasons later; yet, as with so many American operas written in the past half-century—John Adams's *Nixon in China* is a more recent example—*Mourning* vanished from sight thoroughly and has not been heard in three decades.

Enter the Lyric Opera of Chicago, whose admirable commitment to American composers has produced some fascinating near-hits like William Bolcom's *McTeague* and the rare turkey like last season's *Amistad*. With Levy's revision of *Mourning* in the Lyric's beautifully mounted production, the composer and the company have scored an unalloyed triumph. Indeed, in its revised form, *Mourning Becomes Electra* may be the great American opera we've been waiting for.

The story of the haunted Mannons is almost surreal in its unending series of lurid events and Gothic horrors, providing enough familial blood-letting and psychosocial train wreckage for a week of daytime talk-shows. In many ways, this is an American *Trovatore*, a tale of ancient hatreds, illegitimacy, revenge, family secrets, and murder. The elaborate narrative begins with the return of General Ezra Mannon from the Civil War. Mannon's wife Christine is carrying on an affair with sea captain Adam Brant, Ezra's bastard nephew, who is bent on destroying the family for disowning him. Lavinia, the equally bitter daughter of Ezra and Christine, is in love with Adam herself. Christine confirms her husband's suspicions of her infidelity, and, urged on by Adam, poisons Ezra. Orin, the Oedipal, emotionally stunted Mannon son, returns from the war and in revenge for Ezra's death, he and the jealous Lavinia murder Adam. Christine, devastated by the news, kills herself when she hears of his death. A year passes, but even though Lavinia and Orin try to forget the events and live normal lives, the past continues to haunt them. Orin's mental deterioration accelerates, and, driven to desperation at the thought of Lavinia's impending marriage, he attempts to rape his sister. Horrified, Lavinia tells him he has no reason for existence and the shattered Orin kills himself. Knowing she will never escape the curse of the Mannons, Christine resolves to live alone in the shuttered mansion to atone for the sins of all the Mannons for the rest of her days.

That such a tale can make a truly compelling night in the theater is due principally to Levy's tightly coiled, dramatic, and lyrical music. Levy and librettist Henry Butler distilled O'Neill's ambitious yet prolix opus to a dramatically taut three-and-a-half hours (including two intervals). Yet what makes it all work is the immediacy of Levy's musical expression and the great sympathy with which the composer underlines the characters' inner turmoil. The composer has stated in interviews that at the time of the opera's premiere he was unduly influenced by the avant-garde milieu of the 1960s, and felt compelled to make his opera more dissonant and atonal than he would have liked. Thus, this revised version, in his view, amounted to a "cleaning" of the opera's musical coloring. (Levy rescored it for seventy-six players at the Lyric, but also cannily wrote an alternate version for forty

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players, which will make the work more attractive to smaller companies.)

Not having heard the original incarnation, I cannot comment on the differences between the two versions. In its new dress, Levy's musical style evokes comparisons to Britten's *Peter Grimes*, with a basically tonal, lyrical idiom at the service of dramatic development, characterized by a relentless rhythmic impetus to the music and strong, forward-moving stage action. In fact, Orin's second act outpouring, "How death becomes the Mannons," even bears a slight thematic resemblance to Grimes's "What harbor shelters peace?" Yet, as with Britten's, Levy's music doesn't lend itself to arias or individual set pieces, and there is nothing that suggests any extractable "hit" potential. Still, there are many beauties in the score, and while some spikier elements obviously remain from the earlier version, Levy's lyrical paragraphs are suggestive of a long line of American tonal composers such as Samuel Barber and, even, Howard Hanson.

It is the electric intensity of the key dramatic moments that tend to resonate in the memory: the striking confrontation in the first act between Christine and Lavinia, the lyrical love duet for Adam and Christine, and, especially, the second act quartet wherein Christine and Adam proclaim their love while Lavinia and Orin grimly plot his murder. *Mourning* abounds in such juxtapositions, rendered with masterly dramatic skill, as in Orin's bewailing his father's death, while Christine and Lavinia battle each other in the adjoining room. This is a work of searing emotional drama with powerful climaxes and an artful balance in the lyrical respites and moments of reflection.

It is the Lyric Opera's scrupulously cast and directed production that allowed the glories of Levy's score to shine to such a high gloss. The standout in an excellent cast was soprano Lauren Flanigan as Christine. Levy is tough on his singers with much coloratura leaping about in the highest registers, all of which was sung by Flanigan with flair and dramatic impact. In her hands, Christine's second act breakdown upon hearing of Adam's death was almost physically enervating in its intensity and conviction. Cynthia Lawrence was also superb in the even harder role of Lavinia. Lawrence carried off the difficult final scene of the opera beautifully and found just the right sense of ambivalent catharsis in the final moments. Tenor Randolph Locke gave a strong performance as the emotionally stunted Orin. If his wiry tenor was sometimes stretched by Levy's high tessitura, Locke was Orin to the life, stalking the stage like a caged tiger, his contorted body language and awkward gracefulness displaying the inner torment of this figure.

The stark, off-center columned façade, designed by Liviu Ciulei, evoked the demons lurking behind the surface propriety of the Mannon mansion, and Ciulei's plain, well-appointed interiors suggested a nineteenth-century bourgeois household. Richard Buckley directed the Lyric Opera Orchestra with great authority, effectively underscoring the dramatic moments.

In its revised version, Marvin David Levy's opera is a remarkable achievement. If any American opera is likely to make it into the standard repertoire, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is it. A triumph for Marvin David Levy, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and, just maybe, the future of American opera.

—*Lawrence A. Johnson*

The St. Petersburg Philharmonic, conducted by Yuri Temirkanov, at Carnegie Hall.

The St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra gave three concerts at Carnegie Hall on successive evenings in early October under the leadership of Yuri Temirkanov, now celebrating his tenth year as principal conductor.[1]

1 On October 1, 2 & 3, 1998, Yuri Temirkanov and the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra performed music by Sviridov, Schumann, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Liadov, and Ravel at Carnegie Hall, New York.

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Among the many remarkable aspects of this ensemble, one thing stands out—something almost unthinkable in this age of the artistic jet set and the lionization of a few conductors as they occupy too many podia on a part-time basis. This orchestra has had only two conductors in the past sixty years. Mr. Temirkanov (pronounced with an accent over the 'a') took up the near impossible task of filling the shoes of the legendary Evgeny Mravinsky, a saintly and quietly heroic musician who molded the orchestra during his fifty-year reign into one of the supreme instruments on either side of the Iron Curtain. Mravinsky championed new music at his own continuing peril; in the darkest days of Shostakovich's disgrace in Stalin's eyes during the late 1940s, he programmed this composer's music repeatedly and indeed conducted seven premiere performances from among Shostakovich's fifteen completed symphonies. Mravinsky gave the first Soviet performance of Stravinsky's late serial ballet *Agon* and offered other Stravinsky works that were rarely played during those years.

Mravinsky's epochal readings of the late Tchaikovsky symphonies, first available in the West in the late fifties and now reissued on CD, are demonstrations of how, as one listener put it, "a singular style was somehow being kept alive in Russia," in spite of dire privation and political vicissitudes. Russian exiles knew of his work—George Balanchine treasured these performances.

After Mravinsky's retirement, many observers wondered whether Mr. Temirkanov, who was associated for many years with the Kirov Opera "across town" in St. Petersburg, hardly known as a disciple of Mravinsky and not at all the first choice of the orchestra members, could continue any kind of performance tradition. The reality of ongoing artistic emigration to the West had begun even during the Mravinsky era, above all among string players. Furthermore, as a wry participant in the "wild west" atmosphere of cultural politics and polarization in both pre- and post-perestroika Russia, Mr. Temirkanov didn't exactly ingratiate himself by making some tough comments about the efficacy of his predecessor as he took up the post in 1988: "I don't think many people realize that the Philharmonic has been virtually leaderless for the last ten or fifteen years."

Russia's cultural finances are now infinitely more precarious than ever before with state subsidies almost nothing. American orchestra musicians earning well into five figures are in notable contrast to the situation in St. Petersburg, where the average salary of a member of this orchestra is the equivalent of $75 a month, payable in collapsing rubles when and if anyone gets paid in the Russia of today. The strenuous tours undertaken by the orchestra in Europe and in the United States, with their generous per diem allowances, are the basic means of sustenance for this embattled ensemble. On a more exalted plane, there is a palpable idealism in motives for staying in place—Mr. Temirkanov, who was instrumental in the appointment of the supertalented Valery Gergiev as commander-in-chief of the Kirov Opera, noted recently that "there are many wonderful musicians, among them Gergiev, who prefer to stay in Russia and are faithful to their public. . . . They are naive. They are idealists. That may be their reward: that they are allowed to remain naive idealists."

On the matter of the programming for the three concerts, this listener can report with relief and gratitude that not one work—symphony, concerto, tone poem, or whatever—composed by either Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky or Sergei Rachmaninoff was performed. This orchestra is called upon far too frequently to play works by these composers both within and without Russia. Evidently the happy decision was made to perform other works that, while well within a repertory that a national orchestra perforce does explore, were at least a bit unusual. Still, the programs were timid and on occasion inexplicable.

With the exception of a short work by Georgi Sviridov, a student of Shostakovich who died this past January, no composers

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from the post-Shostakovich era or after that were represented. For instance, there is the work of Alfred Schnittke, easily one of the most imposing and productive of contemporary Russian composers, who passed away on August 3 of this year. He certainly deserved a memorial presence on these programs; instead we were given the dreary neo-liturgical music of Sviridov. Another oddment was the presence of the Schumann Piano Concerto played by a young French pianist, Jonathan Gilad, who seemed in inordinate haste and left his exquisitely reposed accompaniment well behind in the race to the finish. And why program Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* Suites 1 and 2 as the final works to be played on the last concert?

Never mind. The audience was left with a lasting impression of tonal depth and breadth in the sound of the orchestra. This is admittedly a matter that is notoriously difficult to be objective about, since the impression given by any orchestra depends so radically on the acoustic environment in which the orchestra finds itself playing on any particular evening. However, I heard the orchestra some eighteen months ago on their home ground in the Great Hall of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic and I am happy to confirm these impressions. What was so impressive about the orchestra *in situ* was the rich power of the strings in all choirs, with similarly robust strengths in the brass and in the horns. Mr. Temirkanov has, in spite of aforementioned changes in personnel, been able to keep staffing his orchestra with players of a distinct tonal sumptuousness, exemplars of a still-extant Russian school of stringplaying that values tonal depth above all. Moreover, the commitment to the music and the energetic bowing right down to the last desks in the second violins was highly visible and very notable.

Hearing the orchestra again in Carnegie Hall, one might erroneously ascribe the special tone of the ensemble to the weight of sheer numbers. It is true that there are more violins, violas and celli in this orchestra than in the Boston Symphony or the London Symphony (two orchestras whose staffing statistics are readily at hand). But the musical results are not the product of numbers. Bernard Holland in *The New York Times* got it right when he noted of the October 2nd concert that "the word 'rich' springs to mind when talking about the string and brass playing, but this is not richness in the sense of mega-caloric food. Rather the sound is deep without being heavy, powerful but not tough, alive but never nervous." Exactly. Mravinsky's shade must be pleased by such praise.

Each of the three concerts had special highlights. Mention should be made of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, played with the richest of timbres in the slower dances; "The Dance of the Earth" and the "Sacrificial Dance" were splendid in their primeval fury. Still, this was not a merely virtuosic display; it was headlong, surging, but still musical in its elementality. The distinguished Latvian virtuoso Gidon Kremer performed the granitic *Violin Concerto No. 2* of Shostakovich. This was a highly instructive performance. Most of us know this work through the magisterial recording of David Oistrakh to whom the work is dedicated. Kremer was one of Oistrakh's protegés and has long been an advocate of Shostakovich's music among so many other contemporary composers, but it would be difficult to imagine two more divergent yet equally convincing renderings of this concerto. Oistrakh's recording looks back stylistically to the Romantic style which was his heritage; Kremer's stern, slashing advocacy of the same work made an equally eloquent case for its being the masterpiece it most surely is, but very much of our time. On a lighter note, Mr. Temirkanov included in his final concert splendidly colorful realizations of two suites by Rimsky-Korsakov and two iridescent miniatures by Anatol Liadov. These are pieces often cast as "pops" items, but rarely done with such care.

—*Alexander Coleman*

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The media

The Gingrich story

by James Bowman

Before agreeing on the Friday after the elections to step down as Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich attempted, with what has lately become typical ineptitude, to blame the media for the Republicans' ill-success in getting congressmen and senators elected. This failure was widely thought to have been owed in part to the party's excessive attention to the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and Gingrich said: "I don't think we are nearly as obsessed as the press corps. Look at all the hours that Tim Russert spent on 'Meet the Press' this year on that topic versus the number of hours on Social Security. . . . I don't think hour after hour of details about Lewinsky are very newsworthy. . . . It is a little disingenuous to spend all this media time on a topic and then turn and say why are these other folks obsessed with it."

Of course it was instantly pointed out by a whole chorus of anti-Gingrichites that, as Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* put it, "the former history professor . . . seemed to be writing himself out of this particular chapter. Gingrich declared last April that he would 'never again, as long as I am speaker, make a speech without commenting on this topic' of the White House sex scandal." At times Gingrich had an almost Clintonian capacity for self-contradiction, but without Clinton's charming shamelessness about it. Yet the soon-to-be ex-Speaker was on to something, and his remark to his Republican colleagues on explaining the reasons for his resignation was unexceptionable: "If I stay . . . my controversial nature would overshadow any successes we might have . . . . So long as I am around, I will always be a target in the news media, which would mean we would never be able to get our message out."

That is true, but it is not the whole story. The language of being "targeted" comes from Gingrich's weakness for self-dramatization and sounds to the public like mere self-pity—like the notorious complaint that he had been required to sit in the back of Air Force One on the flight back from Israel after the funeral of Itzhak Rabin. His media trouble arose not from being "targeted" but from being stereotyped as the wild-eyed radical who led a desperate charge of the barbarian Republican hordes against the Democratic majority in 1994 and won. It was too good a story for the media to let it drop and to begin treating him as just another dull politician. The trouble was that it kept getting in the way of his efforts at public relations—and his eagerness to overcome that stereotype and impress the media with his decency and moderation only served to make matters worse.

It may be that the Republican "obsession" with scandal during 1998 was as damaging to the party's prospects as the media's—though only 5 percent of voters put scandal at the top of their list of reasons for voting. But it is more likely that what really killed all hope of electoral gain was

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that in this one respect the Republicans and the media were on the same side. While the Democrats were striving to associate themselves in the public eye with old people, school teachers, union members, blacks and Hispanics, the Republicans seemed incomprehensibly content to identify themselves—insofar as they identified themselves with a constituency at all—only with the talking heads and sucking thumbs of the ever more unpopular media who were the only ones who shared their enthusiasm for keeping the scandal alive.

It has always been a fatal Republican temptation to suppose that the party might, if its spokesmen were persuasive enough, win the permanently hostile journalistic profession over to its side. So irresistible is this fantasy that on those rare occasions, like the Clinton scandals, when Republican interests seem to coincide with those of the media the poor old, grand old party clings pathetically to its new-found friends, allowing hopes to be renewed that finally, this time, the hacks and pundits and blow-dried anchors and "personalities" who are thought to be so influential will be sitting in their corner. It always ends at least as badly for the Republicans as it did on November 3, but they will be sure to make the same mistake again at the earliest opportunity. In this respect, the once long-memoried elephant is chronically forgetful.

The irony is that, although the media does wield an enormous influence over the voters, it is often a negative influence. If the press promotes it, like the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the people reject it. No group in America is as unpopular as the media, and the Republicans should consider the idea that, instead of merely petulant and futile lashings-out like Mr Gingrich's, they should adopt a much more systematically hostile attitude toward the media. Attacking the media has to be done with care, but it can yield electoral fruit—especially if the first step is to summon up the courage to disbelieve the media's stories about oneself.

That was particularly difficult for Newt Gingrich to do because The Story about him was in many ways flattering to his vanity. He liked to compare himself to Patton or Eisenhower, and so could not resist the image of himself as the barbarian chieftain that Jeff MacNelly, the cartoonist of the *Chicago Tribune*, habitually depicted him as—even when such an image was grotesquely inaccurate (of course, MacNelly—who is to my mind the best of the editorial cartoonists—is capable of using the inaccuracy to make an ironic point). Besides, going along with The Story on any given subject—a story inevitably shaped by the media's progressive bias—is clearly the way to get quoted in the media, and getting quoted is obviously the way to political advancement, individually and collectively. But, having become party to the illusion fostered by the media consensus, the quoted soon find that they have become its creatures and their power to change anything that does not fit with the tendency of The Story is lost.

A good example of the press's setting the terms in which the debate is framed was the nature of the subsequent reporting when Mr. Gingrich resigned from the speakership. Even in defeat, he remained inescapably associated with the image of the "bomb-thrower"—or perhaps just the bomb he was represented as being in the cartoons of Gary Trudeau, illustrator-in-chief to the media consensus. His "confrontational" and "partisan" style was invariably contrasted with the "moderation" of his opponents among the Democrats and his would-be successors among the Republicans—who were naturally eager to kiss the ring of "moderation" in order to receive the blessing of the press.

In fact, as some conservatives pointed out, in every way apart from the scandal, Gingrich had spent most of the three years since the disastrous government shut-down of 1995 trying to be non-confrontational and compromising with the White House at every turn—most recently on the budget, which was full of Democratic (and Republican) spending measures and omitted to include the Republicans' signature tax-cut

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because neither Gingrich nor Trent Lott, his counterpart in the Senate, any longer had the stomach to be in the least confrontational about it.

Yet hear how *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reported the Speaker's resignation. Dan Balz in the *Post* called him "one of the most partisan and polarizing politicians in the country—and one of the most unpopular," and he wrote of unnamed "senior Republicans" who wanted him out because they "believed Gingrich's confrontational style of politics was about to run its course, that the country hungered for bipartisanship and a quieter tone." Balz goes on to observe that

> Gingrich struggled to serve two conflicting constituencies. The American people preferred cooperation to confrontation, progress to ideological warfare. His Republican base wanted sharp distinctions with the Democrats and no quarter given to the president. Whichever way he moved, he found his tactics questioned. . . . Gingrich constantly pledged to change his style, tone down his rhetoric, become less confrontational. He went on a diet and shed weight. He published a book called *Lessons Learned the Hard Way* last spring and worked to change his image. But he had trouble controlling his partisan instincts and the restlessness of his troops in the House, who repeatedly made it clear they were unwilling to be led.

Here in a nutshell was The Story on Gingrich, and Gingrich himself as well as his party was constantly on the defensive about it, which seemed to confirm it to those who made it up—even if they knew better. In the same day's *Post*, Eric Pianin offered confirmation that The Story was wrong on this point, and that Gingrich had had to resign because he had not been confrontational enough:

> For many House Republicans, the seeds of their displeasure with Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) were planted during budget negotiations that gave Democrats key public relations victories and undermined the GOP message of fiscal conservatism. . . . Rep. Michael N. Castle (R-Del.), a GOP moderate leader, said that voters complained to him about the spending bill "that nobody read and where the president got virtually everything he wanted." . . . "That we waited so long gave the president maximum leverage," said Rep. Mark Edward Souder (R-Ind.), a conservative GOP leader. "That we couldn't figure out what was in the bill made us look a little less than sophisticated back home."

Yet even Pianin is wedded to The Story, and later characterizes Gingrich's budget strategy this year as having been "in contrast to last year's bipartisanship"—this because he struck a deal with the conservatives to become more confrontational "over abortion, funding for the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, the environment and scores of other issues" if only they would provide him with votes enough to pass the spending bills. As they did not, the agreement—and therefore the alleged "partisanship"—was moot.

Naturally Guy Gugliotta and Juliet Eilperin, writing *The Post*'s main story on the resignation that day, accepted at face value the word of "one White House adviser" who claimed that "we are mourning the loss of having Newt to kick around anymore. . . . Newt Gingrich literally was the best thing the Democratic Party has had going for it since 1994. . . . If anything, there's total depression on my side of the fence." In fact, it was not Newt Gingrich that was so good for the Democrats but The Story on Newt Gingrich. So long as Gingrich was characterized in the press, absurdly, as more "partisan" than his partisan opponents, the Democrats were placed in the enviable position of appearing to be "moderates" standing up to "extremists."

Thus what was undoubtedly the most ludicrous remark on the resignation was allowed to pass without remark or comment when Katherine Q. Seelye in *The New York Times* quoted the Democratic leader in the

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House, Richard Gephardt. She wrote that "he hoped that Mr. Gingrich's resignation would clear the fierce partisan air that he had fostered. 'I hope that whoever succeeds Newt Gingrich as Speaker will immediately begin the process of repairing the damage that was wrought on this institution over the last four years,' Mr. Gephardt said."

Did he indeed! You or I might have been under the innocent delusion that it takes two to be partisan, and that such a characterization of Mr. Gingrich by someone who is an implacable—well—partisan enemy of many years standing might have elicited at least a word of warning or qualification from the reporter. But because it fits so perfectly with the media's own version of The Gingrich Story, Ms. Seelye offers nothing beyond the observation that the Minority Leader's words about the man she herself calls "one of the most combative and personally confrontational politicians in America" amounted to nothing more than "an unusually biting reaction to a farewell."

Steve Roberts on CNN was similarly willing to accept at face value characterizations of the Republicans by their political enemies when he opined that "There are a lot of very conservative Republicans who say the reason why they lost seats was because the party wasn't pure enough, it wasn't right-wing enough. I think that's exactly the wrong message from the election. I think if you look at their Governors, successful Governors, they won because they moderated the conservatism with a certain pragmatism. And I think it's a real danger for the Republicans if they allow the strong, right-wing voices to dominate this party. . . . As Dick Gephardt has said on the show this morning, that part of the problem any Republican leader is going to have is that Hamas wing of the Republican Party who are not going to compromise."

The Hamas wing of the which party? Images of war and terrorism are always good for a little thrill of excitement and so are welcome in the media—a fact which Gingrich's own martial imagery often recognized and exploited. He may regret it now that even *The New York Times* (Mr. Roberts works for *The New York Daily News*) takes it for granted that he was "a man who always saw politics as blood combat" as well as "a radical, polarizing figure." Elsewhere in *The Times*, Alison Mitchell explained (attributing the thought to anonymous "Republicans") how "the hard edged partisan bite that worked for Mr. Gingrich in the minority came across as stridency in power."

Meanwhile, Francis X. Clines was celebrating the virtues of Representative Livingston of Louisiana, Mr. Gingrich's successor, as a man who was "as taciturn as an antihero in a black-and-white western" and a "traditionalist who quietly cuts legislative deals as if politics were carpentry, not the thrust-and-chop martial arts that Mr. Gingrich often seemed to prefer." Never mind that there had been nothing martial about Gingrich's arts for at least two years. He had stamped his character as "combative" and confrontational on the media consciousness when he went after Jim Wright in 1989, and that had determined The Story of Gingrich. Livingston will likely be similarly stamped as an emollient personality because he comes after Gingrich, even if he unexpectedly proves a bomb-thrower, but for the moment he knows how to play the media game of saying what is expected: "He's a revolutionary," he said of his "dear friend" Newt Gingrich to Sam 'n' Cokie on "This Week" on ABC; "I'm a manager."

Not surprisingly, this is pretty much the same conclusion reached by Mr. Clines in his piece in *The New York Times* when he wrote that "by contrast" with Mr. Gingrich, "Mr. Livingston's supporters found him soothingly colorless in announcing his challenge. He talked of being a 'stay-at-home' House manager, a 'straightforward' caucus leader, but mercifully in the view of Gingrich critics, hardly another 'revolutionary' to generate heated headlines from the ramparts." One such supporter is Representative Ron Packard of California, who

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marked himself out as a comer in the media by adhering slavishly to The Story in saying that "with Newt, we've had a very partisan, confrontational atmosphere. . . . Now with our margin reduced, we just don't have a lot of wiggle room. Bob's ability to work with all parts of the conference is even more necessary if we're going to get things done."

Such language also owed something to the coverage of the election a few days before, which naturally characterized the results as a rebuke to "partisan" conservatives and a message from the electorate in favor of "moderation." As Tom Brokaw said on the "NBC Nightly News," "the American political landscape looks a good deal different tonight than it did just twenty-four hours ago. It now has a broad middle road running through it—the preferred passage of both successful moderate Democrats and pragmatic Republicans." Similar comments were made on the other networks, while Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* said, "You know there's this old line that the only thing in the middle of the road is a yellow line and a dead armadillo. But now everybody is running to the middle of the road. And the faster that you get there the better you do at the polls. So this is a bad election for extremists in both parties and a bad night I think for the Christian Coalition and those who want to pull the Republican party to the right. The centrist, pragmatic Republican Governors did very well."

It was a small step from there to blaming what Peter Jennings called Mr. Gingrich's "snarling image" for Republican losses. Such empty chatter is not only foolish in itself; it also misses the real grounds for reasoned criticism of Gingrich, which are his vanity and his weakness. Having described himself as "a transformational figure" and a "definer of civilization," he came to believe it himself—partly because there was no one in his own party either historically learned or brave enough to laugh at him when he started spouting such stuff. His grandiose self-image then led him to make the inherently trivial matter of the government shutdown into the great symbolic issue of the 104th Congress—whereupon he promptly surrendered. Thereafter, this "firebrand," this "confrontational" and "polarizing" figure could never stand up to Clinton about anything. But he preferred to go on believing in the mythology about himself because there at least he remained strong and unsubdued. He couldn't blame the media for that.

This in itself might not have been so bad, but that the party came to believe it as well. Thus his successor, Bob Livingston—apparently undisqualified for the post by his absurd "We will stay here until doomsday!" speech during the shutdown and his attempt to shakedown his weakened predecessor immediately after the election—called him "a man of Churchillian proportions." What on earth does any House Republican think can possibly be accomplished by such absurd self-conceit? Yet the media does not comment on that either, or on that further proof of Gingrich's deficiency of modesty and collegiality, his resigning from the House as well as the Speakership. He himself explained that "I think as a practical matter for me to stay in the House would make it impossible for a new leader to have a chance to grow, to lead, and to do what they need to do," but he was closer to the mark when, according to Ms. Seelye of *The New York Times*, he privately told his colleagues that "after consolidating more power in the office than anyone in recent decades, he would probably find life as a backbencher unbearable."

He probably would, too, which is the measure of his failure. You'd think the history professor would have known for how many years after reaching high office Churchill sat on the back benches.

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Verse chronicle

Sins & sensibility

by William Logan

Mark Doty's easy, gaudy style loves whatever the eye happens to light upon; his short lines and shorter stanzas are seduced by the surface of things. There were Renaissance artists who specialized in a particular effect—the drape of fabric, say, or a haunting smile—and, if you want all that glitters, Doty is your man. He has a genius for the rhetoric of light—at first this was method; now it's compulsion. The poems in *Sweet Machine* show no restraint in their devotion.[1] Even decay has its gorgeousness:

> rotting palaces flung straight
> up from the sea, yellow
> of mummy wrappings,
>
> coral and rose
> moldering now, faded
> to precisely these
>
> bruised and mottled
> rusts; acid, lichenous
> greens: vitriolized,
>
> encrusted, pearled.

When he mingles disgust and the aesthetic, you think, Ronald Firbank, look out!

Occasionally, Doty makes some gesture toward the depths beneath surface ("art's a mercuried sheen/ in which we may discern,/ because it *is* surface,/ clear or vague/ suggestions of our depths"), but his heart's not really in it—he can't wait to get back to describing those glamorous surfaces again. The book begins with *lusters*, *sheens*, *marbled light*, *lustrous*, *scarab-gleam*, *glaze*, *sun-shot*, *halos*, *sunbeams*, *illumine*, *burnished*, *glaze* again, *gleaming*, and that's only two pages into the first poem: the sunshine comes wholesale. Two poems addressed to recent criticism of his work—poems that may have originated in stray remarks of mine—are highly defensive about this love of the light show. The superficial doesn't have to *be* superficial, but it's not enough to say there are depths; sometimes you have to show what those depths are.

A lot of Doty's poems are about objects—art nouveau vases, a scribble of lilies by Jim Dine, a paneled screen, a dead friend's objets d'art. If all this light recalls the world's transience, its shallow glamor as well as its promise of transcendence, such objects suggest how desperate we are for possession and how unlikely to obtain it (to write of beauty is another way of possessing it). Doty's poems are acts of celebration when they're not elegies (sometimes these are almost the same thing), and, as in previous books, AIDS stands in the shadows. The elegies show little emotion; they're just one more excuse for worshiping the world's variety, and they do it as if paid by the prayer.

Doty is one of the more talented younger

1 *Sweet Machine*, by Mark Doty; HarperCollins, 128 pages, $12 paper.

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poets, full of the pizzazz of language, but you can take only so much pizzazz. At the drop of a hat he's seized by rapture—and that's just in daily life. When it comes to sex he's Judy Garland bursting into song:

> You enter me and
> it's Macy's,
>
> some available version of infinity;
> I enter you and I'm the grass,
> covered with your shock
>
> of petals out of which you rise
> Mr. April Mr. Splendor
> climbing up with me
>
> inside this rocking, lilac boat.

Viva Las Vegas! The campy tone ("God, my dear . . . , is in the *damages*") grows insipid fairly quickly, as does the handkerchief-grabbing sentiment—some poems are so life-enhancing they need their own twelve-step program. I love the showy, luminous effects, but too often they just stay effects: a Bellini-like master of color needs subjects as strong as Bellini's.

There's no telling where Doty's gifts might lead. A poem in the voice of a swan has more immediacy and compassion than any of his poems for humans (his version of city life is like a set for *West Side Story*). Alas, there's also an awful sonnet spoken by a dog, and a poem just as bad about a dog pound ("O Lucky and Buddy and Red,/ we put our tongues to the world"). It's not that Doty doesn't learn from his mistakes; he doesn't learn from his successes. There's too much Up with People rapture here—even Dante had to go through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* first.

J. D. McClatchy's *Ten Commandments*[2] has a clever Procrustean scheme: for each law (Oh, *those* commandments, the reader will say), three poems explore, often in slightly droll fashion, the modern incarnation of old sin. Our culture is steeped in its love of sin—literature is little more than the dirt of sin and the dust of redemption, and has always found the drama of sin its *raison d'être*. McClatchy has used these ancient schemes of religious order to cast a moral light on what otherwise might be mere autobiography. When the Bible says, "Thou Shalt Have None Other Gods But Me," it doesn't have in mind a boy met in a Gents room—and yet these poems remind us that idols are not just golden calves we fall on our knees to worship. Idols are everywhere.

> 1955. A scratchy waltz
> Buzzed over the ice rink's P.A.
> My classmate Tony, the barber's son: "Alls
> He wantsa do is, you know, like, play."
>
> Bored with perfecting my languid figure eights,
> I trailed him to a basement door marked GENTS
> With its metal silhouette of high-laced skates
> (Symbols, I guess, of methods desire invents).
>
> Tony's older brother was waiting inside.
> I'd been "requested," it seemed. He was sixteen,
> Tall, rawboned, blue-eyed,
> Thumbs hooked into faded, tightening jeans.
>
> I fumbled with small talk, pretending to be shy.
> Looking past me, he slowly unzipped his fly.

That sexual irony penetrates our wayward modern souls—McClatchy's graven images (the ones the second commandment gets upset about) aren't garden ornament Baals, they're the wrinkles on his face and an x-ray. Not all the commandments find their sins so revealingly explored. The scheme sits heavily upon them—wasn't one sin worth more than three poems; wasn't one worth fewer? (Some sins are a lot more interesting than others.) The book is torn between private confession and public accusation. Poems on Nero, Eichmann, and Iago (sinners all) and imitations of Ovid and Horace show the richness of implication within a poverty of moral action. The private studies lack only the guilt, the flinched-from re-

2 *Ten Commandments*, by J. D. McClatchy; Alfred A. Knopf, 119 pages, $22.

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sponsibility that made Lowell's *Life Studies* so disturbing.

McClatchy is one of the wittiest of our contemporaries, and a few poems have the glibness of the born comedian ("half wound, half wisecrack," he says, but you forgive the wisecracks because they come with the wounds—indeed, the wisecracks may be wounds themselves). Despite their natty urbane surfaces, the poems often turn bleak and unforgiving, as if the beginnings were by Merrill and the endings by Hecht. There's a lullaby made vicious, a poem applying a Vietnam motif (from Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried") to a room abandoned by lovers, and a poem that moves Proust from parlor respectability to a bedroom of caged, tortured rats.

The frank homosexuality—an advance on the quiet sidestepping of Auden (otherwise a brooding presence here)—is not the point of the poems, it's their medium. Scholars have only begun to study what men are, what "constructs" the male, what a male point of view or a male literature might be. These questions are not equally arresting, but the answers are not identical to what history and psychology and literary studies were before feminism. They are terra incognita. Given the pieties of the academy, which believes women's studies legitimate but men's studies not, such questions will be addressed only through the secret door of homosexuality. In their unapologetic maleness, McClatchy's dark and satisfying poems suggest the answers are not necessarily pleasant, just necessary.

Marie Ponsot's dry, delicate talent is hard to place: at times she sounds like that rarity, a good translation from French. Among our women poets the tradition of eccentrics starts with Emily Dickinson and includes Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, even Amy Clampitt. Whitman was an eccentric, and so was Pound, and so is Ashbery; but women kept their subjects withheld and domestic, their poems more primly minded, more decoratively hedged. Only close reading showed the terrors within.

The poems in *The Bird Catcher* tend to be small and lightweight, whimsical (well, occasionally preachy in a whimsical way), confident in their innocent unselfconsciousness.[3] Ponsot's a poet better quoted than described. Here's a sonnet on folk tales:

> The tale has bends in it. What can it mean
> that he leaves on a quest for a talking horse
>
> but comes back with a princess? In between
> she gives him falcon-power, but remorse
> starves him since he won't kill small game.
> (He'd feast
> if the hut on chicken-legs hopped a snow-hid
> course
> twirling before him through the woods.) He
> runs east,
> west, sleep deprived till he finds the last word
> for sleep, but forgets it when a wakeful beast
> proves to him his mother tongue's absurd.
>
> It's about what all stories are about,
> the bargain they offer or deny the heart:
> to get home, leave home; pack; at dawn set out
> on a trip dusk closes where it started.

I like this better every time I read it—that beast who's a secret logician, that careful placement of "pack" (like a motherly reminder), and the hut on chicken legs, as weird as anything in Auden, or weirder! "The tale has bends in it" perfectly describes her narrative method.

Ponsot's first book, *True Minds*, was published in 1957, her next not for almost a quarter-century. You want to reward her for her modesty, for constructing her poems like no one else—their freshness is a kind of courage. It's easy to teach young poets how to write like other poets; but the result, as you page through magazines forlornly, and finally with dread, is that too many sound as if they'd measured rhetoric from the same bolt and bought subjects from the same catalogue. You can't teach them how to be

3 *The Bird Catcher*, by Marie Ponsot; Alfred A. Knopf, 104 pages, $22.

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original; you can't even teach them to *want* to be original.

Ponsot writes on the mysteries of motherhood, on food, gardens, women writers, on children and divorce, subjects common enough and usually dull enough. But her poems start in odd places, and she's in love with unlikely words and unexpected rhymes. She writes to a rhythm unheard by other poets; her canter's so unusual, in meter her ungainly sentences are sweetly blind to their lack of grace, like the tutu-ed elephants in *Fantasia*:

> In for the winter, your Christmas Cactus
> shouts "Rose" & shoots its flame-seek
> flowers out
> in doubles at the end of each dark stem.
> I can't copy such plenty. But I can
> proclaim how well its structure celebrates
> the lived poetic all your born days state.

I'd go through pages of Ponsot's childish, or plain, or plain childish poems, the occasional banality, the evasive distractedness, to get to the dozen or so that live in their own small magics. Her delicacy is rich with the tact of perception—it makes the reader feel like a pocket Croesus. Rather than praise her further, I'll just quote another sonnet that ought to be in anthologies:

> It haunts us, the misappropriated flesh,
> be it Pelops' shoulder after Demeter's feast
> or Adam's rib supporting Eve's new breasts,
> or the nameless root of Gilgamesh.
>
> Who am I that a given beast must die
> to stake the smoulder of my blood or eyes?
> Were only milk, fruit, honey to supply
> my table, I would not starve but thrive.
>
> But then the richer goods I misappropriate
> (time wasted, help withheld, mean words for
> great)
> would blaze forth and nag me to repudiate
> the habitual greed of my normal state.
>
> My guts delight twice in the death I dine on,
> once for hunger, once for what meat distracts
> me from.

That remarkable line about Eve (how complicatedly moral it makes anatomy), the offhanded use of "misappropriated" and "smoulder" and "nag" and "guts," and that sharp Donne-like ending! The parenthesis declares its relation to the dry-eyed catalogue of loss in Bishop's "One Art," but this poem takes a darker turn. Some of Ponsot's poems stump me—I can't imagine why anyone would write them (that's the way I feel about Auden's early work)—but you never know what you'll find when you turn the page, and it's scary.

Deborah Garrison's *A Working Girl Can't Win* arrived in a glaring arc-light of publicity—a review in *Time* and a full-page photograph in *The New Yorker*, where she works.[4] With much current poetry reduced to minor domestic trauma, you can see the appeal of working life, even if the life is spent moaning in Manhattan coffee bars. A working girl is not quite a working man (a movie titled *Working Man* would be Stakhanovite romance or merely ironic) and does not declare lost youth as "career woman" does. I'm not the only reader who hears "working girl" and thinks Holly Golightly, and there's something sprightly and fortiesish about these poems. They know breakfast at Tiffany's is good, but lunch and dinner even better. The title sentiment is therefore revisionist—a working girl can't take herself seriously, even if she takes feminism for granted, so much for granted that a little old-fashioned self-pity is allowed to leak in.

New York has been a distinguished ground for poets, from Whitman's Brooklyn ferry to Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge, from Elizabeth Bishop's run-over hen to James Merrill's blown-up townhouse; there must be a dangerous surplus of unemployed poets in New York at any time. Garrison is

4 *A Working Girl Can't Win*, by Deborah Garrison; Random House, 80 pages, $15.

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never unemployed—she's too busy whining about her work life, her married life, her old boyfriends, and dashing off sketches of the local scene:

> I trample the scraps of deli lunches
> some ate outdoors as they stared dumbly
> or hooted at us career girls—the haggard
> beauties, the vivid can-dos, open raincoats aflap
> in the March wind as we crossed to and fro
> in front of the Public Library.

No *Talk of the Town* piece would be quite this unfocused or collegiate, this reminiscent of the notebooks of Sylvia Plath during her *Mademoiselle* phase. It's not that these poems are bad, though they're bad enough; it's that they're not sure what poems do, so they fall back on perky diary jotting, full of adolescent malaise and *ressentiment*.

> Here comes another alpha male,
> and all the other alphas
> are snorting and pawing,
> kicking up puffs of acrid dust
>
> while the silly little hens
> clatter back and forth
> on quivering claws and raise
> a titter about the fuss.

"Please Fire Me," the poem's called, and you think of Whitman's copy of *Leaves of Grass* in his desk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which did get him fired. No one reading these poems would sentence Garrison even to an hour at the water cooler.

The poetics of office life ought to be worth melancholy study. Melville saw the comic tragedy in Bartleby, and, in his flawed *Something Happened*, Joseph Heller knew what happened to his soldiers when they disappeared into the lonely crowd. Boredom, anomie, loneliness—Garrison understands the emotions of city life, but not that having emotions isn't the same as writing poems (most of her poems seem like ad layouts for poems). She suffers all the hapless phrasings of a beginner ("the sun's fuzzy mouth sucking the day back/ in through the haze"), while adding a cheery self-hatred and self-pity of her very own. Garrison's poems touch the surface of suffering, of lost chance and lost love, and then they gossip about it.

Andrew Hudgins has been writing paeans to the South all his career, the sort that made Confederate soldiers weep around campfires—they're polished, they're professional, they're about as authentic as Burl Ives (but then much of the South was never authentic; it was a compulsion of inauthenticities, like most cultures). The blurb's genial public hypocrisy has reached new heights when fellow poets can say *Babylon in a Jar* "sounds like the voice of creation itself. His genius is undeniable" or "Andrew Hudgins has become a national treasure."[5]

Hudgins loves the moral precisions of family life and the immoral residue of a history that can neither forget nor be forgiven. Grackles flee from a chinaberry and to the poet it's a "miracle"; a copperhead strikes his rubber boots and he feels pleasure in its hatred of his "advancing paradise"; daffodils break through winter ground and Nineveh falls. At times his life is so full of meaning, it crowds out the poetry—poetry isn't just a life squeezed until the tears start. The poems make more of these moral anecdotes than they deserve, as if to shove the reader's face in them and shout, "This! *This* is poetry!"

> . . . my life, which I had not yet lived,
> clung to those oaks and hickories—my life,
> my parents', brothers', everybody's lives—
> clung to green twigs while the wind was
> claiming us,
> though only I, I thought, only I saw it
> and I kept silent. . . .
> But I was not the wind, or the leaves wholly,
> riding without knowing what it was,
> the in-breath or out-breath of the Lord,
> and as I stood beneath them, listening,
> the leaves sang, dying, *Don't die,* and I've
> obeyed them.

---

5 *Babylon in a Jar*, by Andrew Hudgins; Houghton Mifflin, 96 pages, $22.

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It's a general rule that when the leaves start singing the reader should look for the emergency exit.

The stoic certitudes of Ransom and Tate have become the milky suspensions of many Southern poets—either the South is getting weepier by the minute (you expect Hudgins to whip out a banjo and strike up "My Old Kentucky Home") or the achy-breaky hearts of country music have begun to wander into poetry. When Hudgins writes that a drunk's eyes "flooded with love" or "our eyes brim/ with easy, pleasing tears," or wonders "if sentimentality were my reward/ for living my life well," one man's reward is everyone else's punishment.

Every formal decision in these poems seems directed at getting the most out of mawkishness (the dropped indentations of Pound's juddering thought and Williams's imagistic phrases just give Hudgins an opportunity for teary enjambment of emotion). Every anecdote is scrubbed into bright homily—you end up feeling you've walked out of a particularly nasty Sunday school class. Oddly enough, invocation of those old Biblical sites often clears the air. Hudgins is given to linking plant life to the fall of cities in a time-honored preacherly way, but when he turns to history he sometimes forgets all about his South. He gives a reading of contemporary Russia as dry-eyed as any politics in Auden, and an anecdote out of the *Gallic Wars* as brutal as any murder in Hecht.

> We plowed our charred fields, using each other as oxen.
> Some of us found new gods, and some of those gods were Roman.
> We paid our grain levies and, when he demanded them,
> we sent our sons to Caesar and he made them soldiers. . . .
> and then, in Alesia, we heard they'd kept him caged six years,
> six years in a cage, our handsome king, our famous warrior,
> six years before they dragged him through their capital,
> some gray barbarian from some forgotten war, our handsome king,
> our well-nigh savior, a relic from an old war six years settled.

Such lines contain more poetry than the crippled yearnings of domestic life (everyone's South is different: even Hudgins's Cincinnati has seceded). When the South is one day no longer the South, you can water his poems with tears and watch the magnolias grow.

Mark Strand ought to be the poster boy for postmodernism—in *Blizzard of One* a poet's dry, devious authority is under constant threat, his nihilism full of the death rattle of self-mockery.[6] In some poets authority is the manifestation of doubt: they live within the design of their limitations (too often they become their limitations). Robert Lowell's or Geoffrey Hill's doubts control the theology of argument; but Strand has always been, despite his hollow-voiced booming, a more puckish and slippery character.

No poet who hopes to retain an undertaker's mien could title a poem "The Great Poet Returns" and begin it like this:

> When the light poured down through a hole in the clouds,
> We knew the great poet was going to show. And he did.
> A limousine with all white tires and stained-glass windows
> Dropped him off. And then, with a clear and soundless fluency,
> He strode into the hall. There was a hush. His wings were big.

This isn't just self-referential (few would mourn the loss of most poems about poetry), it's hilariously suicidal. Poets are allowed to be larkish if their larks are clearly stamped, like Eliot's *Practical Cats*; but to destroy the portentous authority of the

6 *Blizzard of One*, by Mark Strand; Alfred A. Knopf, 64 pages, $21.

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poetic voice in one poem is tricky if you want to use it in another. Too much of our poetry has become professionally rueful, as if the middle-class were incarnate tragedians—take out the garbage cans and you're Philoctetes. Strand favors coolly flat statements, near-depositions of the ordinary, but always with a touch of the numinous:

> Out of what place has he come
> To enter the light that remains, and say in the weightless
> Cadence of those who arrive from a distance that the crossing
>
> Was hard with only a gleam to follow over the Sea of Something,
> Which opens and closes, breaks and flashes, spreading its cold,
> Watery foliage wherever it can to catch you and carry you
>
> And leave you where you have never been . . . ?

How gorgeous that "Sea of Something," that "cold,/ Watery foliage." There's scarcely an adjective in sight; it's all simple nouns and verbs and generic chains of dependent clauses and prepositional phrases. When you read Strand you think of moody realists like Edward Hopper and William Bailey, painters who light the world in strangeness; it's no surprise he's written on both and was an art-school classmate of Bailey's. And just when Strand seduces you with such language, he'll throw in five poems about dogs that deflate the poet's Romantic struggle. ("I roam around and ponder fate's abolishments").

Strand has the mythic impulse worse than most poets of his generation (thirty years ago young poets were eagerly devouring Merwin's *The Lice* and Strand's *Reasons for Moving*, and many wrote bad imitations for years thereafter); but he withholds, like an immoral God, the confidence that the creator isn't kidding. Strand has often been underestimated—*Blizzard of One* has pages of gloriously austere, patrician sentiment: poems of aging and death, an elegy for Joseph Brodsky and a premature elegy for Octavio Paz. Strand could write such lines all day, in his torpid, beautifully passive manner, and they would mean almost nothing to him. (I've heard he can do that manner in conversation, as a party piece.) He lives beyond the horizon of emotion.

Strand seems desperate to show that the poet's magic is just a few foolish tricks, a slight catch in the throat, nothing a professional can't manage offhandedly—he's never taken in by such tricks himself, and seems almost condescending toward those who are. Yet that moody voice is so seductive, so rich with elegy and denial, even a wary reader can find himself taken in. In a giddily overwritten pantoum, Strand pictures his friends waltzing, waltzing; and the form has them come and go, go and come—it's all campy and trivial; and yet, when the sons and daughters of the couples come waltzing on, the dance floor swells with that sense of loss, of life passing, that the poem until then had successfully withheld. I'm charmed by such a moment, and hate myself for being charmed.

Paul Muldoon is our poetry's Don Quixote, his lance a leaky pen. *Hay* is his latest installment of glibly rabid raptures, adventures in the rough trade of language, the poet rescuing sonnets in distress, tilting at titling, his faithful cat Pangur Ban at his side.[7] Muldoon is notoriously gifted and just as notoriously difficult to measure. At times he seems a suitcase surrealist in the manner of Ashbery, at times a defrocked priest of Oulipo or a disinherited successor to Heaney and all that is Irish. (Muldoon's jacket photo, which makes him look like a dyspeptic frog, is pointedly captioned with the information that he has become an American citizen.)

The book opens with a phantasmagoric vision in the mudroom of Muldoon's Princeton home and ends with a thirty-sonnet hayride through a restaurant in Paris. Poems shift and ratchet, one time slipping

7 *Hay*, by Paul Muldoon; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 131 pages, $22.

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into another, one place substituting for another, scenes turning themselves inside out, lines jolting and stuttering, mysteriously repeated according to some Masonic code, subject to sudden outcries of "hey" or "wheehee" or "tra la."

> There a wheel felloe of ash or sycamore
> from the quadriga to which the steeds had no sooner been hitched
> than it foundered in a blue-green ditch
> with the rest of the Pharaoh's
> war machine was perfectly preserved between two amphoras,
> one of wild birdseed, the other of Kikkoman.

It's a paean to bourgeois accumulation, the little-valued objects of storage and discard viewed through the archeology of other civilizations: Muldoon sees the ruin of cultures past where an outsider would see just a wheel of cheese or jars of birdseed and soy sauce. There's a "ziggurat/ of four eighty-pound bags of Sakrete," a "shale outcrop" of old record albums. It's a tour de force, both bewildering and wearying, like so much in Muldoon, the present built on the ruins of the past, but the past contained in the present. That, of course, is the way poetry builds on poetry.

Muldoon is in love with the mortal dreck and drainage of culture, in love (not wisely but too well) with language itself—having Auden's taste for the obscure and Heaney's for dialect, time and again he's victim of "the froufrous, the fripperies, the Fallopian/ tubes of a dead cow in the Philippines." Too often the result is tedious foolery, the language run amok with Jabberwocky possibility (words, words, monotonously inbreeding), as if possibility were reason enough for the doing: "there was a glimmer . . ./ that lit his glib all glabrous with Brylcreem,/ all brilliantine-brilliant,/ that glinted and glittered and gleamed as from Elysium."

It's just his father's hair, but a reader wants to cry, "Hold! Enough!" And yet there's always more, not just a little more but a toxic spill of more: twenty-one poems about record albums, or *ninety* haiku (oddly enough, in the eyeblink haiku Muldoon's life, the real life, is most imaginatively present). If you don't like one page, he'll throw something different at you on the next: a ghazal, a pantoum, a riddle, an errata slip alarmingly like a well-known poem by Charles Simic.

It's not that jokes and japes and irritating asides don't have a point (what Muldoon's poems don't have is enough plot or plan or argument), but that the point is little more than the absurdity, the wit in withholding. The frippery turns the poems into performance, with all the layers of egotism that implies, the lovely layers and the unlovely ones. And yet, just when I'm annoyed with the tom-(and dick- and harry-)foolery, just when I grow furious at the lavish wasting of such gifts, a few poems almost redeem the whole collection. It shouldn't be surprising that Muldoon's finest work is about the Troubles: "Long Finish" turns the sights of love to the sites of war, "Third Epistle to Timothy" is a moving meditation on the poet's father, and "Aftermath" (perhaps the closest in spirit to his teacher, Heaney) works its changes on images of terrorism.

> "Let us now drink," I imagine patriot cry to patriot
> after they've shot
> a neighbor in his own aftermath, who hangs still between two sheaves
> like Christ between two tousle-headed thieves,
> his body wired up to the moon, as like as not.

The serious work needs the license Muldoon grants himself for the bad (he's a little factory of poetic license, and his good poems borrow the manners of his worst), but I can't help wishing he found more use for the serious. Everyone interested in contemporary poetry should read this book, fresh and freshly irritating, a pretty ruin of intentions, giddy and so rarely grave (how I wish it were the other way around). In our time of tired mirrors and more-than-tiresome confession, Muldoon is the rare poet who writes through the looking glass.

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Books

Brontosauran bardolatry

by Paul Dean

Professor Harold Bloom will not rank among the great epigrammatists of history. His new book on Shakespeare book is prolix, untidy, repetitive, and bloated by self-indulgence.[1] Yet its central proposition is stated (admittedly, not until page 493) with beautiful simplicity: Shakespeare "is what we know because we are what he knew." Only Chaucer, Bloom maintains, preceded Shakespeare in the creation of a convincing inner self for his characters and Shakespeare surpassed Chaucer. In giving us Iago, Hamlet, Shylock, and a host of others, Shakespeare made us aware of human possibilities to such an extent that our conception of human nature was thereby enlarged. We cannot conceive our world without his terms of reference.

So stated, the argument has a certain plausibility. Shakespeare is undoubtedly able to create as if from within, to interiorize with utter authenticity, more varieties of human behavior than any other writer—so much so that we can scarcely believe that the same person could have imagined all his characters. But he was not a nineteenth-century novelist, and Bloom, like his hero Bradley before him, distorts the plays by importing inappropriate expectations. Characterization is only one aspect of the dramatist's art. Arguably, it was one Shakespeare learnt comparatively slowly; other, more purely theatrical, skills seem to have come easily to him, prompted by the background presence of Marlowe, Lyly, and Kyd.

For all his theater-going, Bloom is oddly innocent about drama. He has no time for Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy* he tetchily dismisses ("a dreadful play, hideously written and silly," a "squalid melodrama"). His Marlowe is a cartoon demon whom Shakespeare had to exorcise. He has no feel for dramatic conventions or for the theatrical milieu in which Renaissance dramatists worked. "No critical method," he asserts, "that works equally well for Thomas Middleton or John Fletcher and for Shakespeare is going to illuminate Shakespeare for us." This moves Shakespeare safely into a position of high Romantic isolation from which Bloom can admire him. He presents himself as an unrepentant aesthete, "Bloom Brontosaurus Bardolater," "a gnostic sect of one," "a hopeless Romantic (my critical enemies would say, a sentimentalist)." Not only his enemies might argue that sentimentality makes for bad criticism. "To reject Falstaff," Bloom booms, "is to reject Shakespeare." Yet it was Shakespeare who arranged the rejection, for reasons Bloom states elsewhere: "Falstaff, the ultimate anarchist, is as dangerous as he is fascinating, both life-enhancing and potentially destructive." (He is tellingly outraged by the "imposter" Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who is markedly unsentimentalized.)

The book covers the entire canon, a rela-

1 *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, by Harold Bloom; Putnam, 800 pages, $35

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tively rare critical undertaking these days, but it frequently sacrifices depth to breadth. Moreover, one doesn't have to be a theorist, only to have a bit of common sense, to find Bloom's character-centered approach unbalanced. A dramatist to whom character was all would write monologues—as, in a way, Bloom does here. As he insists that Falstaff and Hamlet are the summit of Shakespeare's power of characterization, one realizes that he sees himself as both, sometimes a daring old tease, sometimes a melancholic wrapping his inky cloak around him. Could Shakespeare, one wonders, have created Harold Bloom?

Admittedly, there are fine things, if one has the stamina to find them. The discussion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sends the Bestiality School of criticism packing; the suggestions that *Richard II* is "an extended metaphysical lyric" and that Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida* is a sufferer who hates his own clarity of vision open up intriguing perspectives; and the psychology of Iago is piercingly grasped here: "Othello was everything to Iago, because war was everything; passed over, Iago is nothing, and in warring against Othello, his war is against ontology." Iago, an "artist of himself" (Hegel's phrase), is the ancestor of Dostoyevsky's nihilists and Nietzsche's "ascetics of the spirit"; an actor-playwright, half-scripting, half-improvising his own *Tragedy of Othello*, he is the photographic negative of his creator, undone by Emilia only because he failed to reckon with the possibility that anyone could love something or someone more than they loved themselves. Bloom, with startling insight, presents Othello as a hero out of Hemingway, with "precisely Hemingway's blend of masculine posturing and barely concealed fear of impotence."

But all roads lead to Falstaff and Hamlet. Despite the caveats noted above, Bloom writes magnificently about Falstaff, and he is quite right to oppose the puritan critics who try to cram that vast bulk into a pigeonhole labeled "Misrule." His emphasis on Falstaff's intelligence is a welcome antidote to Bakhtinian rumblings about the Belly. On *Hamlet* he is more shaky, assuming too much about the lost pre-Shakespearean play on the subject, of which we know only that it was acted before 1589, contained a ghost crying "Hamlet, Revenge!," and was later mocked for its fustian style. Anxious to deny the traditional ascription to Kyd, Bloom gives it to Shakespeare on no evidence whatever. Hamlet is, he tells us, "Shakespeare's ideal son," named to recall his own son Hamnet, who died in 1596. Never mind that the hero's name in the ancient source is Amleth, or that Hamnet Shakespeare was named after his godfather, a Stratford baker; never mind either that the casting of Shakespeare as the Ghost, so touchingly convenient for Bloom, is an eighteenth-century tradition, not a known fact. As the surrogate son of such a father, Hamlet has to be "the most intelligent character in all of literature," "the most aware and knowing figure ever conceived."

These flagrant over-valuations, which ignore the elements of the adolescent in Hamlet, skew the whole chapter. Nor is it unique in containing wildly exaggerated statements. Elsewhere we hear that Titania's initial exchanges with the translated Bottom are a "comic dialogue that even Shakespeare was never to surpass," and that Shakespeare "never wrote better" than in his contributions to (wait for it) *The Two Noble Kinsmen*! The most revealing example, however, comes as an aside, when Bloom refers to *Twelfth Night* as "cheerfully secular, like almost all of Shakespeare."

With this we confront a major disability in the critic; he has so little sense of Shakespeare as a religious writer that he can claim to discern "a pragmatic nihilism" behind the plays. Bloom seems to regard this as a virtue; he is even willing to call Falstaff a nihilist ("his version of Christianity"), and he must be the only critic ever to believe that Beatrice and Benedick are as well, and to think it any kind of compliment—but then, he believes that "all marriages seem

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in Shakespeare to be headed for disaster," another breathtaking generalization, which makes the entire group of comedies not only pointless but cynical. Actually, for all his harping on Hamlet and Falstaff as bearers of the Yahwistic blessing, "exuberance of being," for all his pseudo-mysticism and thrillingly solemn rhetoric, Bloom is in the end a rationalist. His "nihilism" is merely negative, just as when he acclaims "inwardness as a mode of freedom" as "Hamlet's finest endowment" and adds that "wit becomes another name for that inwardness and that freedom, first in Falstaff, and then in Hamlet"; his "freedom" is an existentialist variety, and therefore a dead-end.

I find Bloom's view of Shakespeare's alleged secularism completely unconvincing. I could make sense of Shakespeare as a nihilist in a context like that provided by Henry Vaughan's magnificent lines from "The Night": "there is in God (some say)/ A deep, but dazzling darkness." Yet that can be weirdly true of Bloom too, who often makes profound remarks apparently by accident. The suggestion that *Hamlet* is not only "neither a Protestant nor a Catholic work" but "neither Christian nor non-Christian" offers a more interesting approach than the standard mouthings about Montaignian skepticism. As for *Macbeth*, Bloom judges it "post-Christian," "gnostic tragedy"; the extremism of his identification with Macbeth, which he assumes we share, at least emphasizes the desperate claustrophobia of the protagonist, his Cain-like existence beyond and outside the human, more than a moralizing reading could ever do.

On *Measure for Measure*, Bloom writes of "the dramatist's simultaneous invocation and evasion of Christian belief and Christian morals"—a defensible comment which does not, of course, amount to saying that Shakespeare is a secular author—and confesses himself baffled as to "how the play, in its Christian allusiveness, can be regarded as other than blasphemous." Perhaps that's the point; the Duke's attempt to play God involves him in some distinctly unappealing behavior, and Isabella's silence when he proposes marriage is telling.

Bloom's agnosticism is most limiting, predictably, when he comes to the romances. He grants to the recognition scene in *Pericles* a visionary intensity, but finds *Cymbeline* "nihilistic" ("That strain again! it had a dying fall"), observing that its pre-Christian setting means that "Christian attitudes toward immortality are irrelevant," as though they could be so for Shakespeare or his audiences. The setting, like that of *Lear*, is a safeguard against prosecution for violating the statute which forbade overt discussion of theological matter onstage, as well as a pre-Brechtian alienation device. The descent of Jupiter in his car Bloom simply writes off as absurd buffoonery, while the (admittedly much finer) statue scene in *The Winter's Tale*, with its unmistakable overtones of resurrection, makes him uncomfortable; it is "not one of the glories" of the play "but rather its principal puzzle."

"How does the representation of cognition, in Shakespeare, differ from cognition itself?" wonders Bloom at one point. The answer is: we know it to be a representation. Coleridge's important rider is too often ignored: "that willing suspension of disbelief *for the moment* which constitutes poetic faith." Bloom's commitment to Shakespeare is beyond dispute, but he lacks a necessary detachment, a wholeness, at key moments.

At the end of his book he winces away from Palamon's hymn to Venus in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, with its unsparing descriptions of the folly which love, "that from eleven to ninety reignest/ In mortal bosoms," can visit upon mankind. Recognizing ourselves here, we must feel guilt and shame, says Bloom, but since "I am not exactly a moral critic, and my Bardolatry emanates from an aesthetic stance," he quickly turns to "a more purely aesthetic appreciation of this superb speech." How-

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ever disarming this is, it is also disastrous. Shakespeare was not an aesthete, and such of his characters as try to be aesthetes themselves (Richard II or in a sense Iago) come off very badly. Shakespeare was a moral being, and *he* was not a Bardolater. (If he had been, he would have cared about the publication of his plays.) It is really inadequate of Bloom to keep taking refuge in an empty pose, which in his better moments he knows to be such. He is trapped in an image he has made of and for himself. Some "inventions of the human," we are forced to conclude, are more successful than others.

PC New York

Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace
Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898. Oxford University Press, 1350 pages, $49.95

reviewed by Francis Morrone

The history of New York has become, in the last decade or so, an academic cottage industry. It has also become a popular phenomenon. As Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace (not the Mike Wallace of *Sixty Minutes*, I hasten to add) note in their mammoth new book, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*,

> One of our ongoing avenues of inquiry follows New Yorkers as they slowly developed the conviction that their past was worth knowing, even worth preserving. Indeed, we believe there is a greater degree of interest in Gotham's history today than was ever the case before. We hope to nourish this ripening historical sensibility by telling the city's story in a spirited way—a relatively easy task given that it's intrinsically dazzling, a claim we think transcends both the fond boasting of all historians for their subject and the legendary conceitedness of New Yorkers (we notorious braggarts).

It is therefore surprising that many years have passed since there has been a proper narrative history of New York City.

William Smith's *History of the Province of New York*, published in London in 1757, is generally regarded as the first such attempt. (A revised edition came out in 1792 from Matthew Carey of Philadelphia, the young republic's leading publishing house.) *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* by Washington Irving was published in 1809. It was a tongue-in-cheek mock-epic of the city's founding. The authors of *Gotham* pay an obeisance to Irving in the title of their book: New York's well-known sobriquet was first applied to the city by Irving in his *Salmagundi* essays in the first decade of the nineteenth century. *Gotham*, Anglo-Saxon for "goat town," is an actual village in Nottinghamshire. Burrows and Wallace tell us that, from the Middle Ages on, Gotham and Gothamites were the butt of jokes that were something like the idiotic "Polish" jokes with which we are all familiar. (*Merie Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham* was published in England in the early sixteenth century.) Gothamites were cast as a dim lot. But they also proved cagey: according to legend, to forestall the entry of King John into their town in order to declare a valuable swath of its land a public (king's) highway, the villagers feigned insanity, which apparently, for reasons not altogether clear (pity? fear?) dissuaded the king from entering the town and implementing his plan. Thus the legend of the "Wise Fools of Gotham"—whose imaginative and concerted action to block urban renewal sounds like it would have earned the favor of Jane Jacobs. In any event, Irving's use of the term was largely pejorative.

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were many attempts, some awful, some quite sophisticated, at general histories of New York. But it is another kind of work altogether that stands at the pinnacle of New York historiography: I. N. Phelps Stokes's *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (published in six volumes between 1915 and 1928), that improbably ornate collation of

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documents and graphical materials that remains the single best resource for historians on the topographical development of the city. Of that other nineteenth-century genre, the narrative general history in unadorned prose, our century's pickings have been meager indeed.

That the history of New York has become an academic cottage industry has its good and its bad points. The good is in the thorough plumbing of primary materials. For example, Timothy J. Gilfoyle's *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (Norton 1992) is an amazing feat of scholarship, making use of source material few of us even suspected existed. (The history of prostitution, appealing at once to feminism and to prurience, is a hot topic these days.) The bad is in the use to which the unearthed material is put: to buttress what are, in most cases, deeply flawed premises about the nature and history of the city. There is, in academia, a powerful presumption, born of decades of academic leftism and reflexive anti-capitalism, that the story of New York is that of labor pitted against capital, or of oppressed minorities yearning to breathe free but beaten down at every opportunity by entrenched oligarchies.

In spite of their obeisance to Irving in the title of their new history, Burrows and Wallace do not turn in a very Irving-like performance. Instead, they have given us a sure and supple *summa* of recent progressivist writing on the history of New York. On the plus side, I should note that *Gotham* is crisply written and wide-ranging. In many respects, it is an impressive achievement—informed, erudite, amusing—and it will receive, I am certain, glowing reviews. But since other reviewers will probably not focus on its shortcomings, I would like to take the opportunity to note a few things that I find disturbing.

In their introduction, Burrows and Wallace state:

> Our book will journey along through time, taking each moment on its own terms, respecting its uniqueness. We adopt the perspective of contemporaries as we relate their experiences, remaining mostly in their "now." Yet, like all histories, *Gotham* is not the simple reflection of an underlying reality, but a construction. The narrative embodies our selections, our silences. It is organized around patterns we discern amid the swirl of events.

The English language is a marvelous thing: note that "Yet," a three-letter monosyllable that allows its users plainly, flatly, and without missing a beat to contradict themselves. It is the part on the nearer side of "Yet" that seems accurate: this book is, "like all histories," heavily constructed. As for the far side of "Yet," it strikes me that the authors' tone throughout the book belies their assertion of respecting the uniqueness of anything. It is a sardonic tone, for the most part. Anyone with whom they deal who does not share their opinions and attitudes is clearly made out to be a ridiculous figure. This, indeed, is another one of those books out of academia where the authors automatically assume that anyone who reads it will share their opinion that to speak against abortion or contraception or premarital sex or masturbation is the height of stupidity. (The book is therefore quite multicultural in its animadversions: observant Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and Muslims alike will find much here that is offensive.)

Burrows and Wallace, highly educated and sophisticated academics, obsessed by issues of class, have no more nuanced a view of class dynamics (indeed, no real conception of class dynamics at all) than does James Cameron, writer and director of the technologically stupendous and almost unbelievably simple-minded film *Titanic*. Indeed, *Gotham* is much like the film: remarkable resources and long, hard work lavished upon simplistic premises. As in Cameron's film, Burrows and Wallace's book posits a working class that is morally and aesthetically superior to the middle and upper classes. Where the "lifestyles" of the middle

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and upper classes are the result and the reflection of ill-gotten gains, of exploitation, expropriation, and a preening, hypocritical moralism, the working class, by contrast, is unpretentious, natural, unaffected, unhypocritical, authentic.

An example: Writing about bourgeois home life in the 1820s, the authors note that upper-class women "utilized the parlor, for Bible readings, charity meetings, after-church teas, and the formal 'morning calls' that maintained class boundaries by defining the people to whom one was, or was not, 'at home.'" (The authors, presumably, allow anyone into their homes who knocks on the door.) Working-class women, on the other hand, "did not dress up and pay each other formal parlor visits—they had no parlors—but they socialized through open windows and dropped in at one another's kitchens, children in tow, to exchange gossip and information. Neighbors intervened in quarrels, sat up with sick infants, swapped news of market bargains, and helped out in crises (removing goods and furniture in case of fire, or rallying to block evictions)." And on the *Titanic* they danced and whooped it up in steerage, while in first class they had to sit through suffocating formal dinners.

This is, as close as I can make out, the basic value system that informs *Gotham*. The glaring fact that the hoveled hordes of Five Points became golf-playing suburban Republicans must either be ignored or explained away. The economist Thomas Sowell has written eloquently of the fate of nineteenth-century New York's poorest and most "oppressed" group: Irish Americans, who "today have equalled or exceeded the American national average in income and I.Q., and their family size and voting patterns are very similar to those of other Americans. Historically, it represents one of the great social transformations of a people." (See *The Economics and Politics of Race: An International Perspective*, Morrow 1983.) It seems to me that you could tell the story of, say, the Irish in New York principally in terms of an almost unimpeded material progress. But that would require a dynamic approach to the subject, not the static approach that most of our urban historians favor.

The authors do present a vast panorama. The only way to judge the accuracy of so large a treatment is to zero in on those aspects about which one feels oneself relatively expert—in my case the 1820s and 1830s. New York had not yet grown Brobdingnagian. "Republican virtue" was not a phrase so easily scoffed at. The growing prosperity of the city; the architecture of the Greek Revival; the literary culture of the Bread and Cheese Club at Wiley's Bookstore on New Street; the nearness of countryside and the sweep of grand country estates that so impressed Tocqueville and Beaumont along the East River from Kips Bay to Hell Gate (of which only Archibald Gracie's mansion remains)—there was a golden little moment when the city had attained, however provisionally, something like a coalescence of urban form together with a crystallization of nationality. Fate determined that this antebellum gentility was insupportable.

So what do Burrows and Wallace have to say about my favorite period? Quite a bit. Take for example chapter 28, "The Medici of the Republic" (the phrase is Mrs. Trollope's). In twenty pages, the authors adroitly limn the outlines of the city's nascent bourgeois culture. The range of topics is typical of all the book's sixty-nine chapters. Here are the conflicting elites, the Episcopal Knickerbockers vs. the Puritan Yankees. The former went in for playgoing, horseracing, and Freemasonry, the latter for temperance and observing the Sabbath. The authors write of the fashions in clothing inspired by neoclassical taste (the origin, for men, though the authors don't say so, of the buttoned-down Brooks Brothers look). They write of bourgeois fashions in home furnishings, of dining habits, of vacations and summer resorts (the Catskill Mountain House, the Coney Island House). They write of art (the birth of the Hudson River

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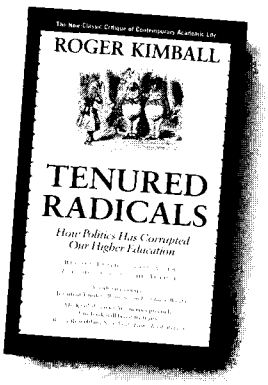
A new revised edition of the now-classic critique of contemporary academic life

ROGER KIMBALL'S

Tenured Radicals

How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education



Since *Tenured Radicals* first appeared in 1990, it has achieved a stature as the leading critique of the ways in which the humanities are now taught and studied in American universities. Trenchant and witty, it lays bare the sham of what now passes for serious academic pursuit in too many circles. In this new edition, completely reset, Roger Kimball has brought the text up to date and added a new Introduction. Those who have never read *Tenured Radicals* are in for a treat; others may find a second reading worth their while. "Mr. Kimball names his enemies precisely.... This book will breed fistfights."—Roger Rosenblatt, *New York Times Book Review.*
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School) and literature (the bucolic romanticism of Irving, Cooper, and Bryant). There's John Trumbull's Academy of Fine Arts, the hauteur of which begat the rival National Academy of Design, whose first president was Samuel Morse. There's the neoclassical architecture of Ithiel Town and A. J. Davis and Martin Thompson. There are the shifting boundaries of fashionable neighborhoods, from the Battery to Park Place to St. John's Square to Bond Street to Lafayette Place to Washington Square, thence to the country mansions along the river. There's the mania for the Greek, inspired by contemporary European taste and by the *cause célèbre* of the Greek War of Independence (in 1823 a Greek Committee composed of wealthy New Yorkers was established by William Bayard to raise money for the cause).

And so on. Burrows and Wallace's is a virtuoso performance—its occasional P.C. platitudes notwithstanding—typical of the authors' clear exposition of vast mounds of extremely diverse material, ranging from personal hygiene to institution formation. (It is in this, though certainly not in its tone or politics, similar to the type of history at which Paul Johnson is the undisputed master.)

The following chapter, "Working Quarters," carries the treatment through to the less-advantaged classes, and opens a bit distressingly: On New Year's Eve of 1827 "several thousand workingmen" drunkenly marched through the streets of the city, through neighborhoods both rough and genteel, rich and poor, raising a holy ruckus, beating on pans, blowing horns, shouting, making "the most hideous noises," breaking windows, harassing pedestrians. One expects some raucous behavior on New Year's Eve, but such marauding bands were not limited to that night:

> During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New York's propertied classes had more or less tolerated such instances of plebeian revelry because they were relatively

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> harmless. . . . Even after the Revolution, "Callithumpian bands"—echoing ancient European traditions—had continued to parade about, beating on pans, shouting and groaning, mocking the powerful and overly dignified. Respectable opinion had grown steadily less tolerant of self-organized plebeian frolics, however, partly because they affronted genteel notions of correct behavior, and partly because every year they became more truculent, more defiant of authority. It was one thing for great throngs of working people to rejoice noisily at Lafayette's visit or the opening of the Erie Canal, civic ceremonies orchestrated by gentlemen; it was quite another for rowdies to take over the streets, wantonly destroying property and terrorizing law-abiding citizens.

Leaving aside that only minds too genteel by half could come up with a phrase like "self-organized plebeian frolics," one wonders, again: Why so sardonic a tone? Is it "overly dignified" not to want one's sleep disturbed by a load of drunken louts banging on pans? At any rate, "Callithumpian bands" are one of the leitmotifs of Burrows and Wallace's book. (By the way, it should be *callithumpian*—uncapitalized.)

That the wilding bands were clearly not welcomed by Olmsted and Vaux to their new Central Park in the 1850s and 1860s is, from Burrows and Wallace's perspective (chapter 44), one of many things that makes the park a symbol of unforgivable elitism. To make way for the park, "sixteen hundred or so Irish, Germans, and blacks who lived on the land—dismissed and disparaged as 'vagabonds and scoundrels'—were evicted by 1857." "Dismissed and disparaged" by whom? We are not told. That's a case of ideological animus betraying the authors into incredibly sloppy writing. Burrows and Wallace write of Olmsted and Vaux's vision of "a space designed to school both patrician and plebeian cultures by transmitting, almost subliminally, civilized values and a 'harmonizing and refining influence.'" (To transmit civilized values is, of course, a euphemism for class oppression.) Olmsted and Vaux "called for exiling the normal business of urban life to beyond the park's perimeter. Coal carts, butchers' carts, dung carts, and fire engines that had to cross the park were to be diverted to sunken transverse roads (rather as servants and tradesmen were kept out of sight in genteel mansions)."

Since we know that keeping servants and tradesmen "out of sight in genteel mansions" is bad, are we to infer, from the authors' sardonic comparison, that they would prefer Central Park to be filled with "coal carts, butchers' carts, dung carts, and fire engines"? Actually, I think they would. Central Park, by being clean, kempt, and orderly, was obviously intended for the privileged, genteel classes. It "was far less welcoming to the working classes"—who, as we know, prefer the dirty, unkempt, and disorderly. The park's design "banned not only their conventional recreations but their republican political culture." My sense of outrage was getting fairly numb by this point.

But it is preferable to chapter 45, "Femme Decovert" (a pun on the legal term for a married woman), the second paragraph of which begins with this sentence: "New York provided many opportunities for same-sex encounters." It goes downhill from there, including the ritual paean to the abortionist Madame Restell.

The promotional materials from Oxford University Press make much of the authors' having spent twenty years on this and, presumably, its forthcoming companion volume (due in 2000), bringing the story up to date. The book is substantial and an achievement of which its authors should certainly feel very proud. After all, a Paul Johnson, who can knock out a volume like this once a year, is the exception not the rule. *Gotham* abounds in virtues, and its authors, I daresay, have probably assimilated more of the literature of New York than any other two men alive. Yet I get the strong feeling that the authors rarely allowed their material to suggest new ways of looking at

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it. That's the real work of the historian, the part that takes time.

Bored and boring

Gerard Aching
The Politics of Spanish American "Modernismo" By Exquisite Design.
Cambridge University Press,
183 pages, $49.95

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

The term *modernismo* in Spanish American literature refers to a group of poets and novelists who around the turn of the century embraced the model of French Parnassianism to reinvigorate literary form. The most prominent names associated with the movement are familiar to anyone who has ever taken an advanced course in Latin American literature—Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Rubén Darío, Julián del Casal, José Enriqué Rodó. Until now nobody has thought to associate the word "politics" with this movement, largely because most of its protagonists were either non-political or worked hand-in-glove with the Latin American politico-military-financial establishment (who also paid their bills). Also, nobody probably cares much about the politics of poets as good as these, and a good thing too.

This book obviously began as a doctoral dissertation, and on that score at least seems to have served its purpose—the flyleaf informs us that the author has found a berth in the Spanish department of New York University. Those of us who have written dissertations will recognize here (with embarrassment, I hope) examples of our own past sins—particularly the ponderous, pompous tone of voice, a kind of parody of our favorite professor discoursing in seminar.

But this is 1998, so there are some new features that probably didn't show up in our own efforts. There is the polite nod to the currently fashionable authorities (Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, Louis Althusser); the ever-so-slight dissent with received wisdom; the throwaway rejection of "vulgar Marxism" (as opposed to the other—the good—kind); the tendency to blow up trivial issues to major points of discussion; and so forth. In effect, it is a book written for the exclusive consumption of a committee of bored (and boring) senior academics. Not for the first time, to be sure.

Another modern touch is the deconstructionist gibberish in which it is written. There are "sites of literary production," "dialogical characters," "reading constituencies," "class alliances" that are "concretized," "identities" that are "constructed discursive[ly]." We are even invited to consider something Aching calls "the political economy of poetry"—I'd rather not.

The Politics of Spanish-American Modernismo is a useful heuristic device (a cliché from my own graduate school days, that) for understanding why ever fewer students are taking courses in literature in American universities these days, and how the craft of literary criticism, once the province of public intellectuals like Edmund Wilson, Christian Gauss, or, in the field of Hispanic letters, Samuel Putnam, Irving Leonard, and Gerald Brenan, has sadly become the exclusive province of people who can't read, can't write, and can't teach. And who probably hate literature to boot.

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Letters

Emotions of Virtue

To the Editors:

This past summer Roger Kimball devoted an installment of his series, "Reflections on a Cultural Revolution," to Eldridge Cleaver (June 1998). At the end of the article I was surprised to discover some critical remarks on an article of mine, "A Tale of Two Reactions," that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (May 14, 1998). Not surprised at the criticism, of course, which is legitimate and worth responding to, but at finding myself paired in Mr. Kimball's mind with this *louche* figure. It must have been a hot summer in New York.

The disagreement between us is genuine and ought to be explored, if only because there is so much we share. Mr. Kimball notes this and it puzzles him. He is used to crossing swords with those who deny either that a cultural revolution has taken place in the United States, or that it has caused a great deal of social damage. I deny neither. But since I do not promote his "therapeutic" approach to the phenomenon, whatever that may be, he concludes that my position can only be, "if you can't beat them, join them." Here it is I who must confess not to understand Mr. Kimball, for I am not sure who belongs to the despotic force (his term) occupying our culture, who the collaborators are (his term again), and who is left over. Until I have answers to these questions I haven't a clue where to apply for my membership card.

Mr. Kimball, who edits a magazine devoted to making intellectual distinctions, evidently has trouble distinguishing between the moral situations of Vichy France and Nineties America. He is eager to fall on his sword and worries that too much reflection on the "sociological, technological, and demographic phenomena [that] have been adduced to 'explain' the rise of the counterculture" will weaken his will. His reasoning is that the task of the cultural critic is "diagnostic and, ultimately, therapeutic"—and not merely "etiological." But etiology is unavoidable in thinking about revolutions, and in any case Mr. Kimball's series is chock full of it. On page after page, the usual horses are dragged out for their whippings: the beats, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," Susan Sontag in Vietnam, *The New York Review*'s "Molotov" drawing, and now Eldridge Cleaver. Even without reading Tocqueville, he should know from his own experience that an earthquake as enormous—and, yes, as damaging—as the Sixties could not have been caused by the moral collapse of a handful of cultural elites.

He must know, first of all, that the cultural revolution happened in every developed nation on the globe, and in some not so developed. How, then, can Mr. Kimball (quoting Irving Kristol) claim that "what happened was internal to our culture and society, not external to it"? The youth culture that first sprang up in America after World War II also developed through spontaneous generation in Western Europe and Japan. Even outside this wealthy class of nations, subtle and not so subtle changes occurred in social habits: dress codes relaxed, parental and institutional authority weakened, church atten-

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dance declined, sexual mores became less strict, censorship became difficult to enforce, and mass culture grew everywhere into an enormous polluting industry. Something profound in postwar experience inspired Japanese hipsters who had never read "Howl," young Mexicans who had their own recipes for Molotovs, and Swedish pornographers who couldn't pick Susan Sontag out of a police lineup.

Where Mr. Kimball and Mr. Kristol are right is that something unique *did* happen to American culture during the Sixties, in the sense that Americans pushed the passions then swirling through much of the world to unheard of extremes. I have my own views about why this happened, which I've expressed elsewhere ("Still Living with '68," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 16, 1998). I have no idea whether Mr. Kimball shares them; I simply note that to date he has been reluctant in his series to consider the American roots of this American difference, as have other conservative and neoconservative critics. Their reluctance probably arises from the awkward shift these critics have had to make between the Eighties, when they were celebrating the good sense of "ordinary Americans" who rejected the values of the "new class," and the nineties, when it became clear that ordinary Americans had also become the problem. In the Reagan years these writers lost the habit of looking critically at "their country, their culture," except when they could blame our cultural pathologies on foreign nihilists or an adversarial class. I don't think that the neoconservative critics of the Sixties and Seventies would have been surprised at my calling our cultural revolution a "plausible metamorphosis" of American ideas, but Mr. Kimball now pretends not to understand the phrase.

This unwillingness to think critically once again about the cultural implications of American political ideas, and about the recent momentous transformations in American society, is what gives Mr. Kimball's reflections their reactionary air, a charge I stand by. The history of reaction is the history of political moralists who are always mistaking their genuine moral predicament for an outdated but more romantic one. There is no shame in being a public moralist, so long as one remains clear-headed and dispassionate. But revolutions are passionate events: they throw off our moral bearings so long as we allow those passions to rule us. This is the one lesson Mr. Kimball unfortunately fails to draw from Tocqueville: that since genuine revolutions cannot be wished away, our long term responsibility is to moderate them, our short term responsibility is to understand them. And that includes understanding why they occurred and why they are taken to be legitimate.

But perhaps the cultural revolution can be wished away. Mr. Kimball, and indeed, many other writers for *The New Criterion*, seem unable to make up their minds. At times, when the point is to emphasize how great the damage has been, one hears a tone of sober resignation. At others one hears a defiant call to resistance. And there would be nothing wrong with cultural resistance, so long as it was intellectually consistent—that is, so long as it also implied resisting the economic and political forces that contributed to revolutionary success. Nothing in Mr. Kimball's series leads us to think he is prepared for that. So, in the end, the greatest challenge for the reader of "Reflections on a Cultural Revolution" is deciding where *its* author stands—not on the past, but on our cultural present and future. Instead, the author strikes a pose: "when a country is occupied by a despotic power, the choices are two: capitulation or resistance. Capitulation is always an easy option; that does nothing to justify the moral evasions it involves." Or, as Eldridge Cleaver once put it, "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Mark Lilla
Department of Politics
New York University

Roger Kimball replies:

I am confident that most readers of my series on America's cultural revolution will not experience the difficulty that Mr. Lilla confesses to about "deciding where" I stand. No decision is required: I tell the reader straight out that, in my judgment, the effects of this revolution on "our cultural present and future" have been, are, and will likely continue to be an unmitigated moral and intellectual disaster. Many people on the Left

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have taken issue with me about this; Mr. Lilla is the only one who professes confusion about what I meant. I am happy to have this occasion to clear up any doubts he may still entertain.

Mr. Lilla's essay for *The New York Review of Books* was widely noticed for two reasons. The first was the audacious parallel he drew between the cultural revolution of the Sixties and the so-called "Reagan revolution" of the Eighties. Never mind that the policies of the Reagan administration would be more properly described as *counter*-revolutionary. Mr. Lilla's strategy—an increasingly popular one, as it has turned out—was to adopt the arguments conservatives had mounted against the Left, surround them with declarations of his own moderation (a "small stream of liberal thought" he called it), and then accuse conservatives of acting too much like left-wing activists. It is a clever strategy that is still playing in a newspaper or journal near you.

The second reason that Mr. Lilla's essay was so widely noticed was his contention that it is merely "reactionary" to oppose revolutions that have succeeded. "The revolution is over," he told us; the smart policy is therefore to give in: resistance is useless. Witness the fact that many Americans "see no contradiction in holding down day jobs in the unfettered global marketplace . . . and spending weekends immersed in a moral and cultural universe shaped by the Sixties." Wealth plus irresponsible hedonism: what could be better?

As for Eldridge Cleaver: wrong though he was about many things, in the end he was right that "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." It is a pity Mr. Lilla cannot bring himself to acknowledge this.

"Commentaire" at 20

To the Editors:

In chiding the French magazine *Commentaire* for not speaking out more vigorously against the deconstructionists and postmodernists, et al., David Pryce-Jones (September 1998) sets up as his standard of rectitude (as do so many who know the book by its "long-famous phrase") *La Trahison des clercs* of Julien Benda, where "treason lay in the abandonment of intellectuals of the democratic values which so privileged them and their society." Actually, Benda's charge was that the *clercs* abandoned their vocation of disinterestedness to enter politics and display political passions.

The more interesting fact, which Mr. Pryce-Jones (and many others) does not know, is that in 1949 (twenty-two years after the publication of his book) Benda approved the death sentence passed on Laszlo Rajk in the NKVD trial in Budapest. In *Les Lettres françaises* (November 17, 1949), Benda wrote: "Voltaire was true to his role when he took up the Calas affair. So was Zola in the Dreyfus scandal. I claim to be like them when I defend the Hungarian verdict, whose justice only the prejudiced seem to deny." Cited by Arpad Kadarkay in *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Blackwell 1991, page 404).

Daniel Bell
American Academy of Arts and Sciences

David Pryce-Jones replies:

Intellectuals who take up causes risk doing so at the expense of truth, Julien Benda argued in the Twenties. This simple point is in no way falsified by the sad fact that in the Thirties and Forties he fell into the very trap against which he had warned.

I am sorry that Professor Bell should suppose that after a lifetime of morbid fascination with the whole phenomenon of Nazi and Communist fellow traveling, I can still remain ignorant of Benda's collapse. The locus classicus among many examples is György Faludy's autobiography, *My Happy Days in Hell* (André Deutsch 1962, pages 244–6). After an adventurous exile spent resisting Nazism, Faludy returned to postwar Budapest. Shortly before his own arrest, he had a meeting with Benda in the presence of secret police agents. He therefore had to resort to literary and historical allusions in an attempt to convey the reality of the Rajk trial and Hungarian Communism. "I can see that you feel happy now that you are back home," Benda concluded, illustrating the saying that there is no fool like an old fool.

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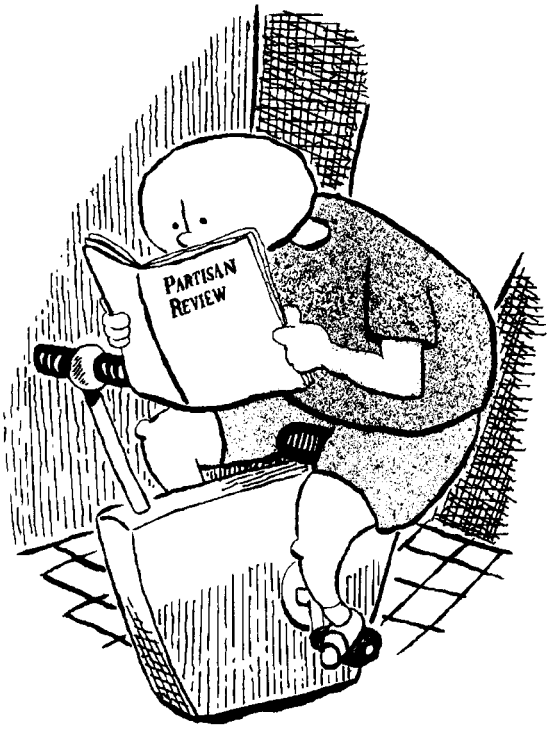

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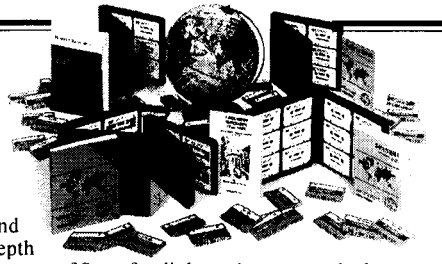

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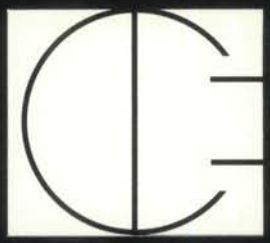

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